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The Smaller Switch

ANDY McNAMARA
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@GI_AndyMc

Perhaps I'm not living my life to the fullest, but I welcomed the Nintendo Switch Lite announcement with open arms. Gamers' opinions seemed divided (as they often do) when Nintendo announced this smaller and cheaper version of the unit. Because it removes many of the features that allow the Switch to be both a home console and a handheld, some feel the Switch Lite betrays the system's core identity. However, others are excited for another way to experience Switch games on the go – not to mention a lower price point certain to bring in even more players.

Switch Lite sits firmly in the handheld camp. It doesn't connect to a monitor, has a smaller screen, and the signature Joy-Cons don't detach from the unit (among other minor changes). Add in the fact that it features a real d-pad now, and this new system has me sold.

The one thing that concerns me is Nintendo's online services, and how the company is perpetually behind on that front. Many online-streaming services let people have up to three simultaneous streams on multiple devices, but Nintendo can't seem to understand that users may want to own and use more than one Switch. Whether or not you can access your game library from a second system is governed by convoluted rules involving which Switch is your designated "primary console" and whether you are connected online. If you want to play a downloaded game on your non-primary console offline (like on an airplane), you will need to switch – pun intended – that designation.

Yes, this stops people from buying the game once and putting it on all the units in the household with a single game purchase. But it also creates a cumbersome experience for many potential Switch Lite users, like people who plan to use their original Switch connected to a TV, and then take their Switch Lite on the go.

Ultimately, these are fringe examples of how you might want to use your Switch, but as Nintendo becomes a more digital-focused company, it needs to find ways to protect its games and IP without making the experience a mess for players. The Switch is an amazing piece of hardware, and I'd love to see Nintendo deliver the same first-class experience with its services.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

42 **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare**
The annual franchise returns with a full-fledged campaign and a bevy of multiplayer experiences, including 2v2 and expansive ground wars. We visited Infinity Ward HQ in Los Angeles to play the game and learn how this Call of Duty shakes up the formula. ***by Daniel Tack***

08 The Rise of the Auto Battler

Like battle royale and the MOBA before it, a new genre has exploded onto the scene that is eating up players' time and inspiring myriad copycats. What is the auto battler, and why is it so popular?

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We talk to the team at Ubisoft about supporting its massive open-world RPG.

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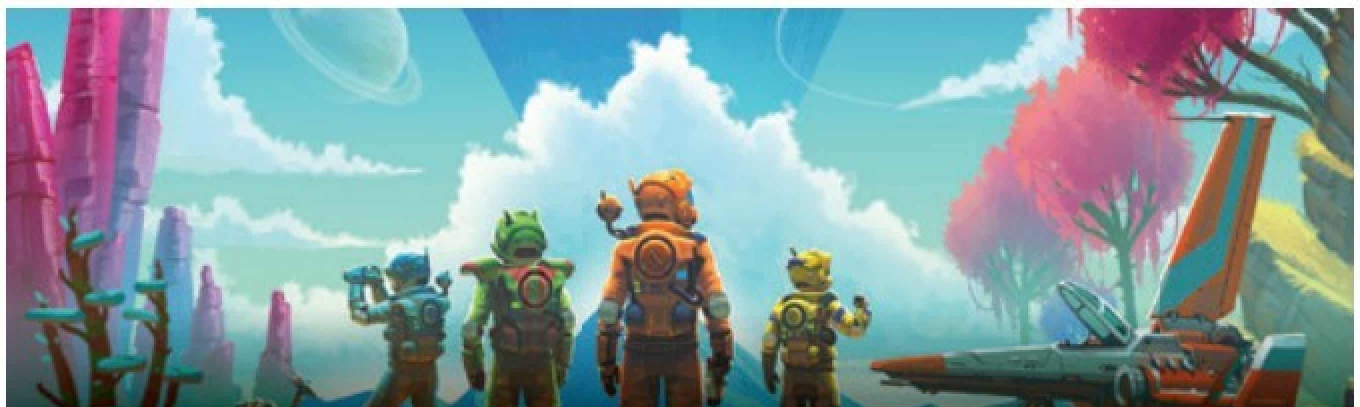
Many of the most recognizable logos in gaming are made by one guy, and his name is Cory Schmitz.



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In the past, video games would launch and that would be it. Today, the release is just part one of a long-term plan. We examined (and graded!) the experiences that are pitching themselves as games-as-a-service.

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The Blair Witch video game was one of E3's big surprises, and we learned all about it.

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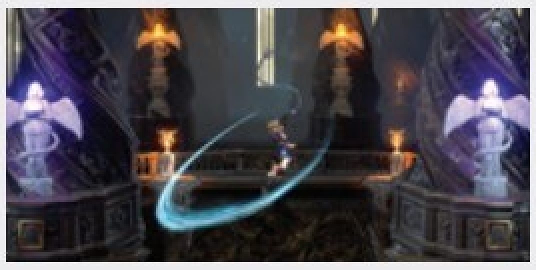

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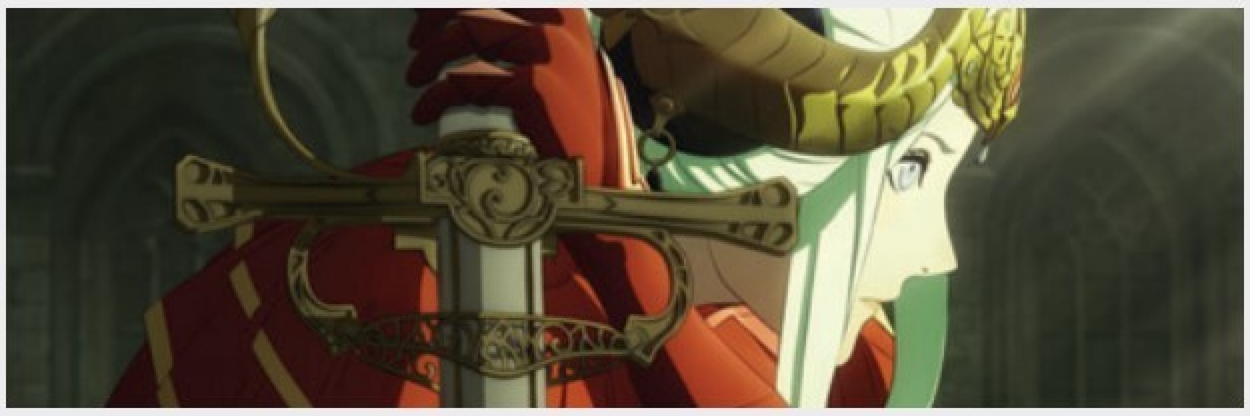

89 Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Nintendo's strategy series continues its impressive run with one of its best entries yet.

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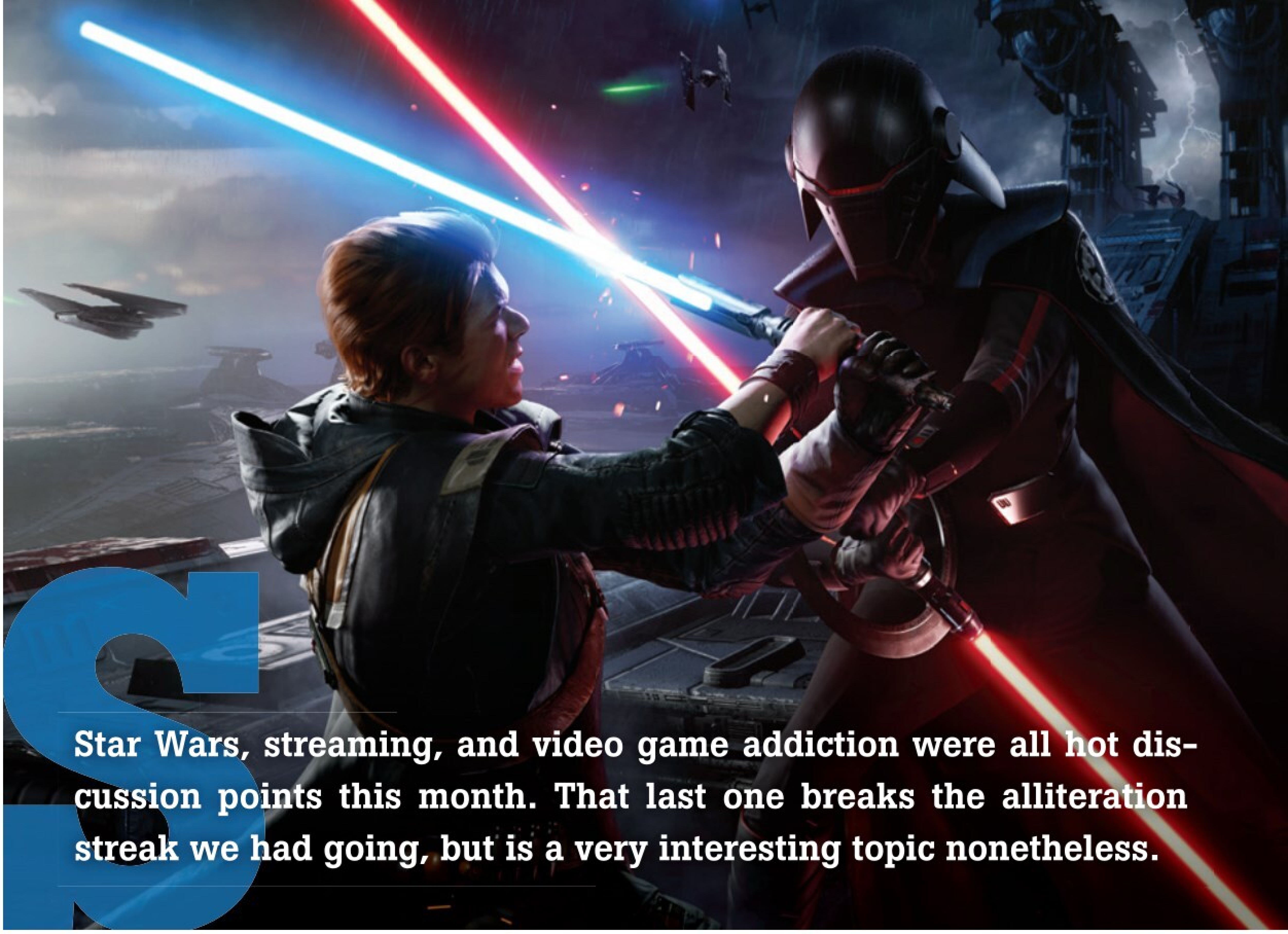
feedback



Star Wars, streaming, and video game addiction were all hot discussion points this month. That last one breaks the alliteration streak we had going, but is a very interesting topic nonetheless.

A Galaxy Not So Far Away

I was very disappointed when EA canceled Amy Hennig's Star Wars game, but an action game from Respawn sounded almost as promising. I was left somewhat underwhelmed by EA's stage demo for Jedi: Fallen Order at this year's E3, but your in-depth look at the game and its development has me excited once again. Also, could BD-1 be any cuter? Hopefully, Respawn can keep tweaking the moment-to-moment gameplay to make it feel a little more cinematic and epic.

Jamie Segal
via email

Do you think we'll ever see a modern Star Wars game that doesn't involve lightsabers? Don't get me wrong, playing with lightsabers as a Jedi/Sith is cool and all, but I just feel that lately too many Star Wars games focus on them. I would love to have a modern Star Wars game where you play as a regular soldier on the field and don't have to worry about any lightsabers. Sure, there's Battlefront II, but there are still lightsaber-wielding characters in it. Honestly, I'd love another Rogue Squadron, or at the very least a remastering of Shadows of the Empire.

Sean Phillips
via email

Jedi: Fallen Order may not have been the flashiest demo at E3, but it holds a lot of promise for fans of Star Wars and action games alike. Learn more about the game at gameinformer.com/starwarsjedi. As for ditching lightsabers, we've got a whole list of different Star Wars games we'd like to see and play – but a Shadows of the Empire remaster isn't on it.

A Missing Mutation

I immensely enjoyed E3 this year and am looking forward to a good portion of the games and hardware that were announced. One exclusion I find troubling is BioMutant. This seemed to be one of the most anticipated games of last year (at least for me), and now it's just dropped off the map. Does BioMutant's omission signal development troubles? Is THQ Nordic saving it for Gamescom? Do you have any theories as to why it's gone so under the radar in the past year? An excited and slightly nervous fan would like to know your thoughts.

Ari
via email

Fear not, Ari. While BioMutant wasn't featured on a press conference stage at E3 this year, THQ Nordic did have a playable demo on the show floor, and we're guessing we'll see more at Gamescom as well. Delays are certainly always possible as the months in 2019 dwindle down, but don't take a dip in coverage or a little radio silence from the developers as a bad omen.

Reality Check

Issue 314's looks at the future of streaming and the next PlayStation were both excellent reads. It is amazing how these two seemingly disparate articles are interlinked. In regards to streaming, I live near Dallas-Fort Worth in Texas, which according to the FCC should be an internet nirvana. However, I'm super happy if I can get 10Mbps out of my 25Mbps connection on a good day. Even Microsoft's more conservative broadband map overestimates actual coverage. Streaming games without latency is not happening anytime soon, and I want nothing to do with it. Which leads me to your article on the next PlayStation. If I purchase another console, it will be the PlayStation 5. Why? Because of two simple features you mentioned: "hard drive" and "physical media!" Microsoft better be paying attention too.

Phil Dunlop
via email

By all accounts Microsoft *is* paying attention. While the company's Project Scarlett announcement at E3 didn't reveal any actual hardware, the company did say the new system will still have a disc drive for physical games, and a solid-state drive with benefits similar to what Sony is touting for the next PlayStation. We still have lots more to learn about both consoles, but the next generation should let you continue gaming the way you want to.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Double Take

I was reading one of your older magazines from 2018, and I realized that in all the issues I've ever gotten (starting in May of 2017), you have never once mentioned Fortnite or Apex Legends. I know you must get a lot of comments like this, but those are two of the most quickly growing games. I thought this would be a great time to start writing about Fortnite, because it's been almost two years since the official launch – seeing the game highlighted in G.I. would be a great birthday present for fans.

Connor Benjamin
via email

You may want to take a second look through your old issues, Connor. Not only is Fortnite frequently mentioned in the magazine as a modern industry touchstone, we reviewed it last September (issue 305). Apex Legends also got a two-page review in this year's April issue (312). You're correct that both games continue to be popular, however, which is why you'll find them in our Lifeline of the Living Games feature on page 22. Enjoy!

One More Turn

I wanted to express my appreciation for your article, The Tangled Web of Video Game Addiction (issue 314). I have been gaming since 1976, and according to the criteria laid out by the World Health Organization, I've been a video game addict for the last 40 years. I was one of those kids the national news did reports on, stealing quarters from their parents to keep playing arcade games. A lot of people seem to confuse obsession and true addiction, and I was glad to see this issue addressed in such a balanced way in your article.

Maalac A. Steele
via email

The Entertainment Software Association's denial of the addictive nature of video games reminds me of tobacco companies and nicotine. However, I kind of understand their stance. I mean, what video game company wouldn't want an addiction warning label on their packaging? Isn't that a selling point for most gamers? In any case, there's a difference between substance addiction (alcohol and drugs), and behavioral addictions (video games, food, pornography, etc.). I think gaming is just a generalized disorder in which some people don't have the necessary self-control to stay healthy in the face of something that appeals to their addictive inclinations.

Mike Wilder
Santa Rosa, CA

There certainly is a distinction to be made between substance addiction and behavioral addiction (gambling being the most pertinent comparison given the rising prevalence of lootboxes). The bottom line, however, is some people have a hard time stopping – and it would be wrong to put all the blame on them when many games are explicitly designed to elicit that response. There's still plenty to debate over what video game addiction is and how it's defined, but hopefully we can all agree that more research in this area is a good thing.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will consoles ever catch up to PC when it comes to the availability of decent strategy games?"

Probably not.

"Do you think Disney will invest money to bring Knights of the Old Republic to console?"

No, but at least it's backward compatible on Xbox One.

"Where is your Judgment review?"

Page 86!

Question Of The Month:

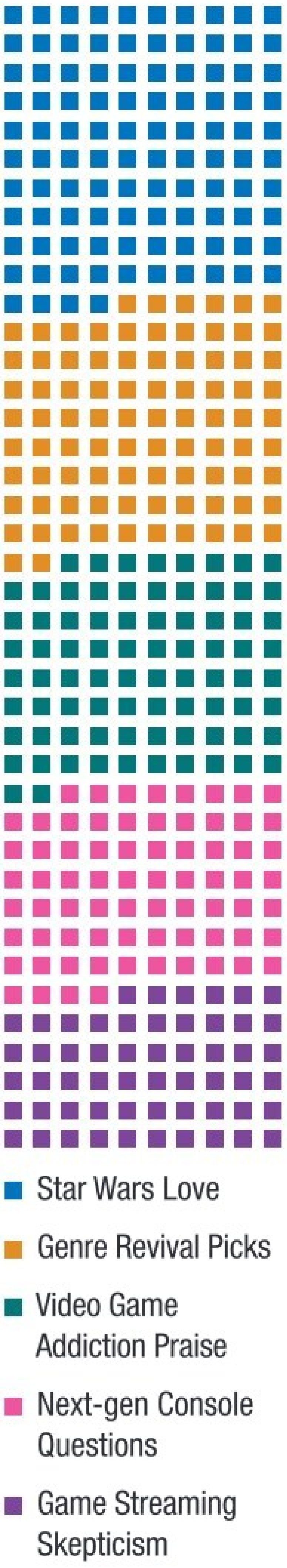
From reader Anthony Herrera: What developer would you like to see branch out to a different genre? Pitch your dream project!

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

Shenmue III

(Left) Infinity Ward's Joel Emslie, Jacob Minkoff, Mark Grigsby, Geoff Smith, and Taylor Kurosaki gave us a full debriefing on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare. The new one, not the old one.
(Right) No one awkwardly holds a shoulder quite like legendary Shenmue creator Yu Suzuki.



Show Some Love

In issue 315, we asked readers what game genre deserves more love. Here are some of the faithful old favorites they highlighted.

Car-combat games need some love! Twisted Metal, Vigilante 8, and Rogue Trip (love the poodle gun!) all need reboots. Also, honorable mentions go to text adventures (Zork!) and shoot 'em ups (R-Type, Ikaruga, etc.).

Mike Smits

Sim racing games deserve more love. I imagine most people think of racing as a side activity in games nowadays, like GTA V. But games such as the F1 series or Dirt Rally include remarkably realistic customization options, like the ability to tweak suspension geometry, brake bias, differential lock, aerodynamics, and even tire pressure! Through this, a player can set up a car that perfectly suits their driving style, which can be just as gripping as an RPG.

Michael Reeves

Without a doubt, strategy games need more love. Between all the shooters and other action-oriented bundles of chaos, it's a pretty fun change of pace to switch from soldier to leader, from pawn to puppeteer. I've burned countless hours playing the Civilization games and Endless Legend; they're just tons of fun that too many people overlook.

Rose Pearce

The visual novel genre. Whether it's a romance sim or a nail-biting drama, if you're caught playing one, chances are you're going to hear a snide remark about it. For those of us in the know, visual novels are the perfect genre when you want a good story without worrying about complex controls or figuring out how to progress. You always get a satisfying experience with lots of replayability thanks to multiple endings, and the plots are as hard-hitting and emotional as any other genre.

Joselyn Meadows

(Left) This year at E3, Bertz caught up with former Game Informant Nick Ahrens and Fortyseven Communications' Jen Chong and Chrissy Kelleher. **(Right)** Bertz also ran into Arkane Studios' Sébastien Mitton and Dinga Bakaba.

gallery

WINNER

1 Zach Whitehorn

How Shredder never got his own spin-off is a total mystery. At least give him a Mortal Kombat cameo!

2 Yetzabel Santoyo

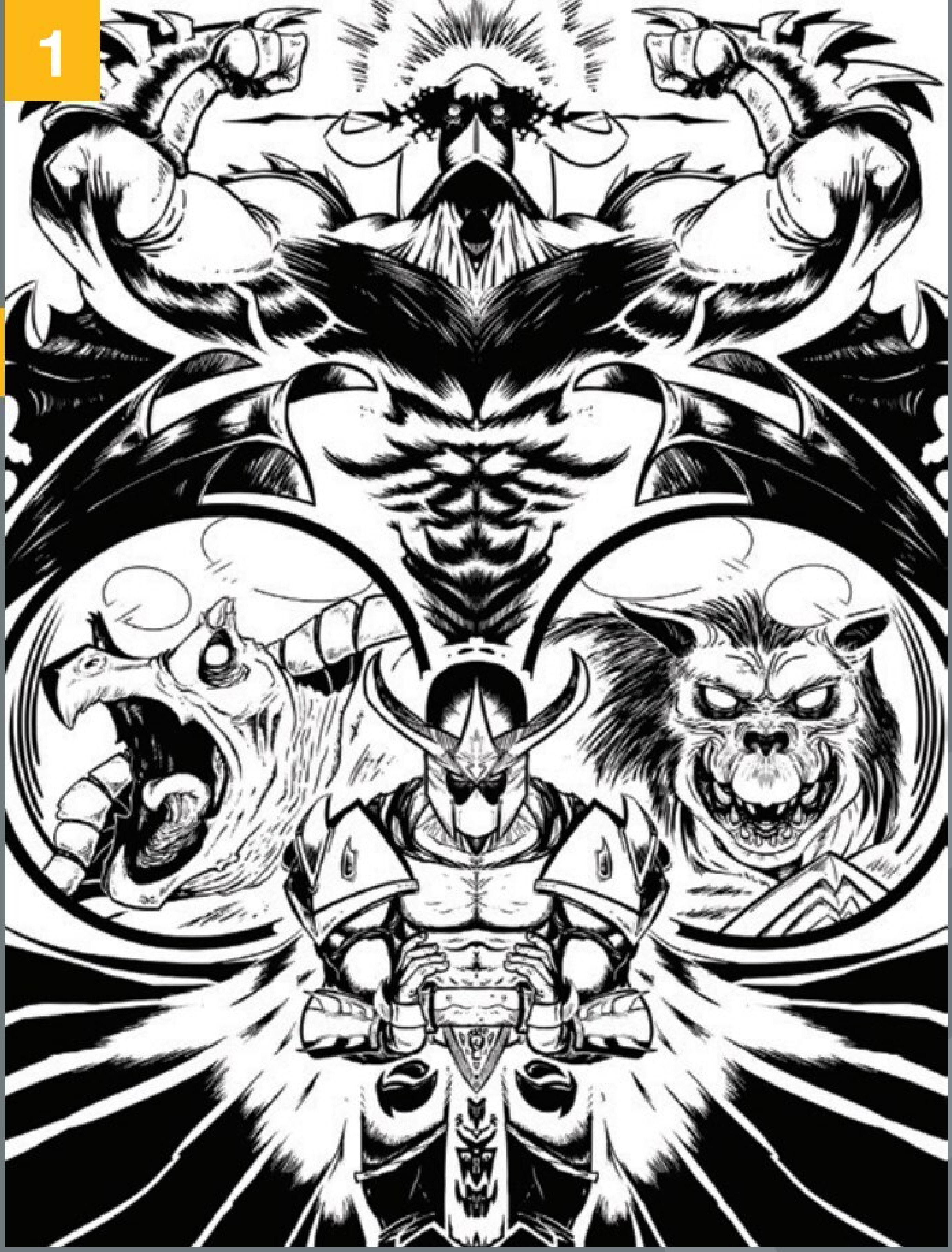
We doubt the goddess of creation and death would bother with doll cosplay, but we're willing to roll with it.

3 Henry Yaeger

Wake up, people! This is how the robot apocalypse starts!

4 Catherine Cummings

Detective Pikachu's latest case: Who robbed Ryme City's famous department store, Lavender Apparel.



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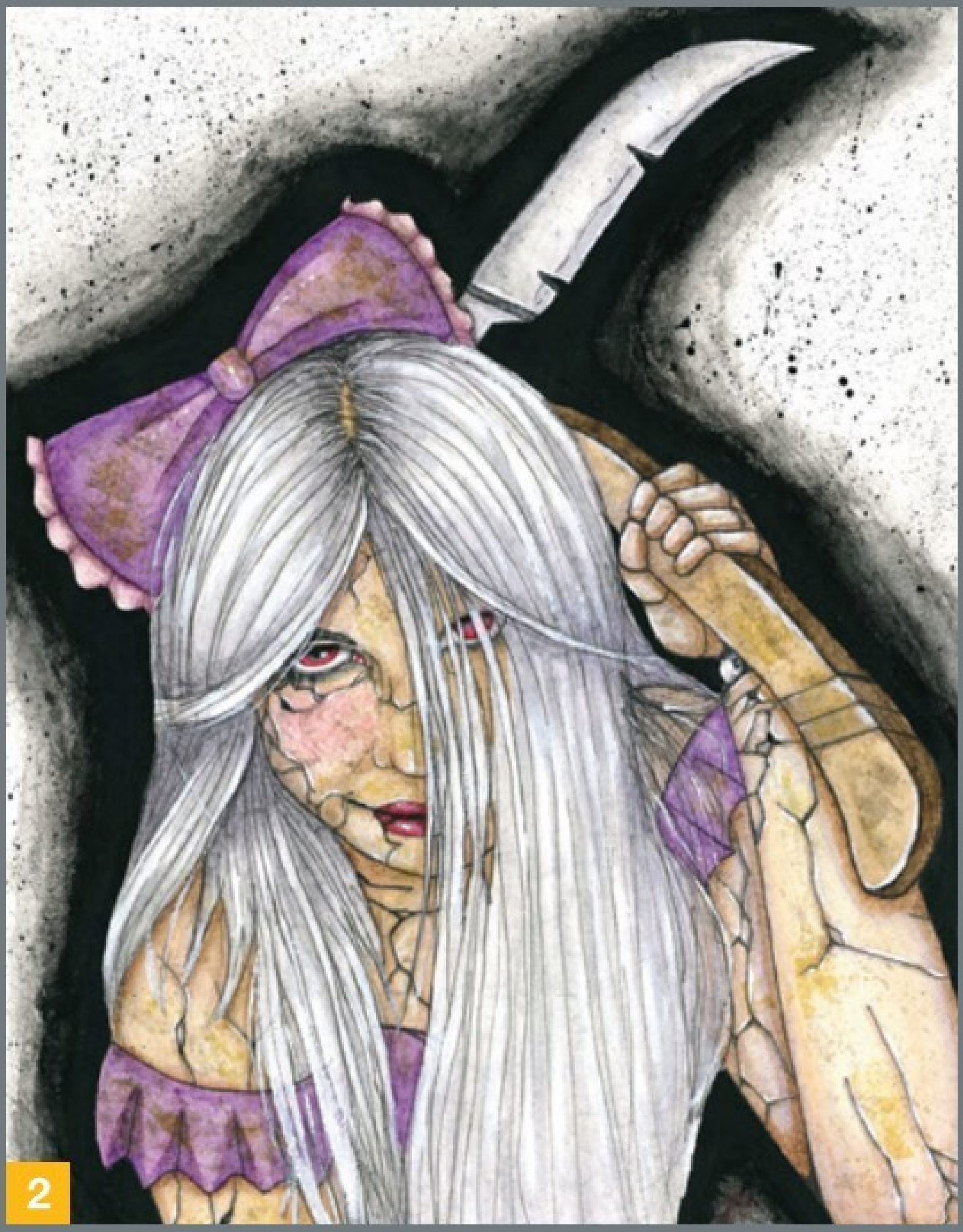

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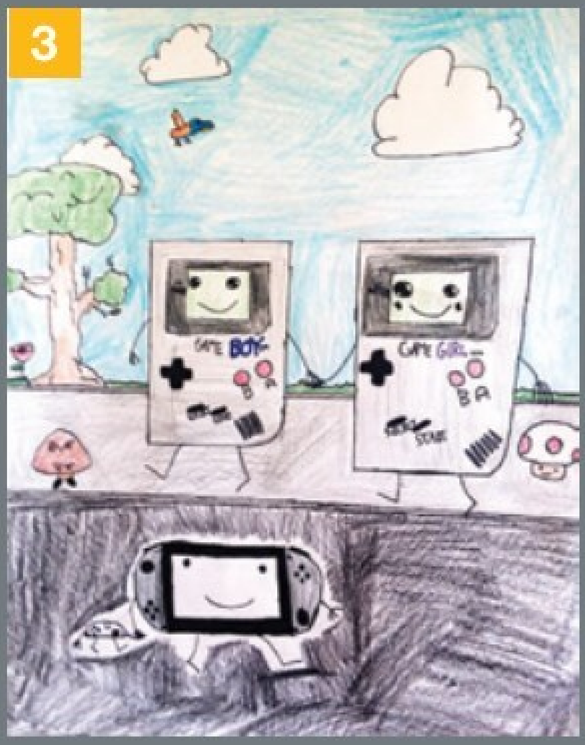

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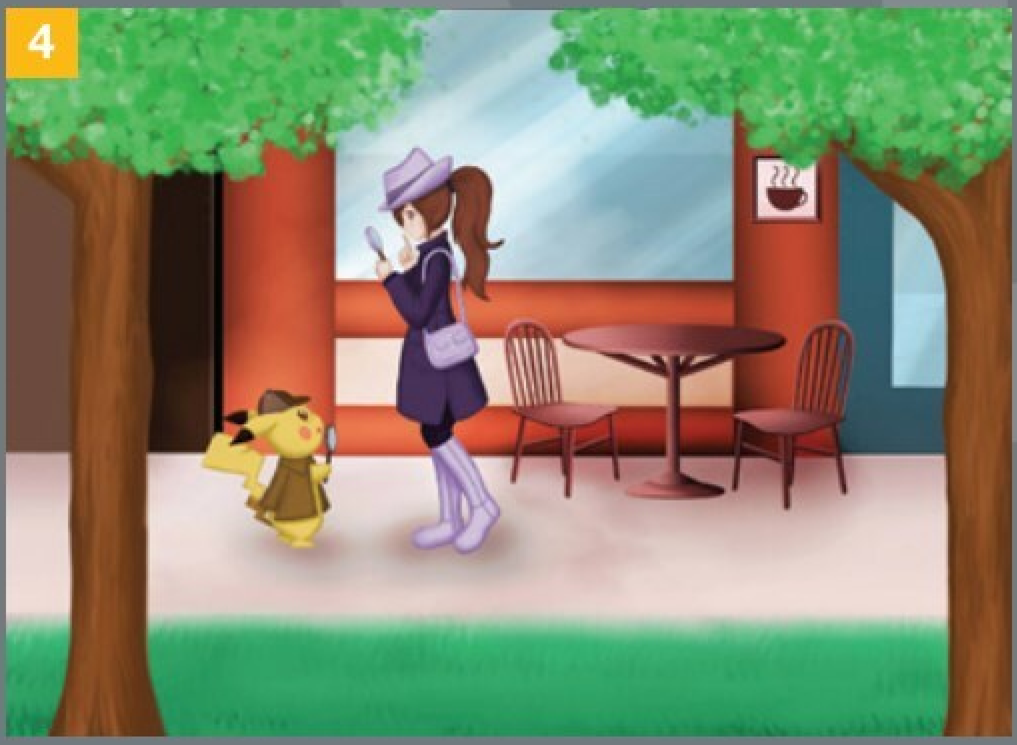

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(Left) Check out The G.I. Show for our recent chat with Oxenfree's Adam Hines, Her Story's Sam Barlow, Vampire The Masquerade Bloodlines 2's Cara Ellison, and Quantic Dream CEO Guillaume de Fondaumière. **(Right)** Back in Minneapolis, we got a welcome visit from Fiftycc's Lizzie Killian and Games Done Quick's Kasumi Yogi.

connect

THE RISE OF THE AUTO BATTLER

Like MMORPGs, MOBAs, and battle royales before it, the new auto battler genre is poised to shake up the PC scene with numerous entries and wild ideas

Once upon a time, the PC scene was rife with real-time strategy titles. Games like StarCraft, Command & Conquer, and Age of Empires II were showered with critical praise and strong sales, but they eventually gave rise to the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBAs) like League of Legends and Dota, where much of the micromanagement and resource components of RTS games were streamlined, allowing players to focus on a single hero or unit. This created a newfound emphasis on teamwork and synergy, with role-playing aspects that let players level up over the course of a match. More recently, the MOBA has given birth to the auto battler. While auto battlers still focus on team composition and economy management, the battles themselves are automated encounters.

History repeats itself even further, as two of the biggest players on the MOBA scene – Riot and Valve – are in the mix on this burgeoning genre's rise to fame. Market research group Newzoo reports Riot's Teamfight Tactics generated 15.2 million hours of live viewership on Twitch during its first week, and it shows no signs of slowing down, placing it in the hallowed company of games like Fortnite. Valve's Dota Underlords had more than 200,000 simultaneous players on its launch weekend, making it the fourth most-played game on Steam. Where did this phenomenon come from? We look at the auto battler's origin, its current major players, and the widening field.

by Daniel Tack

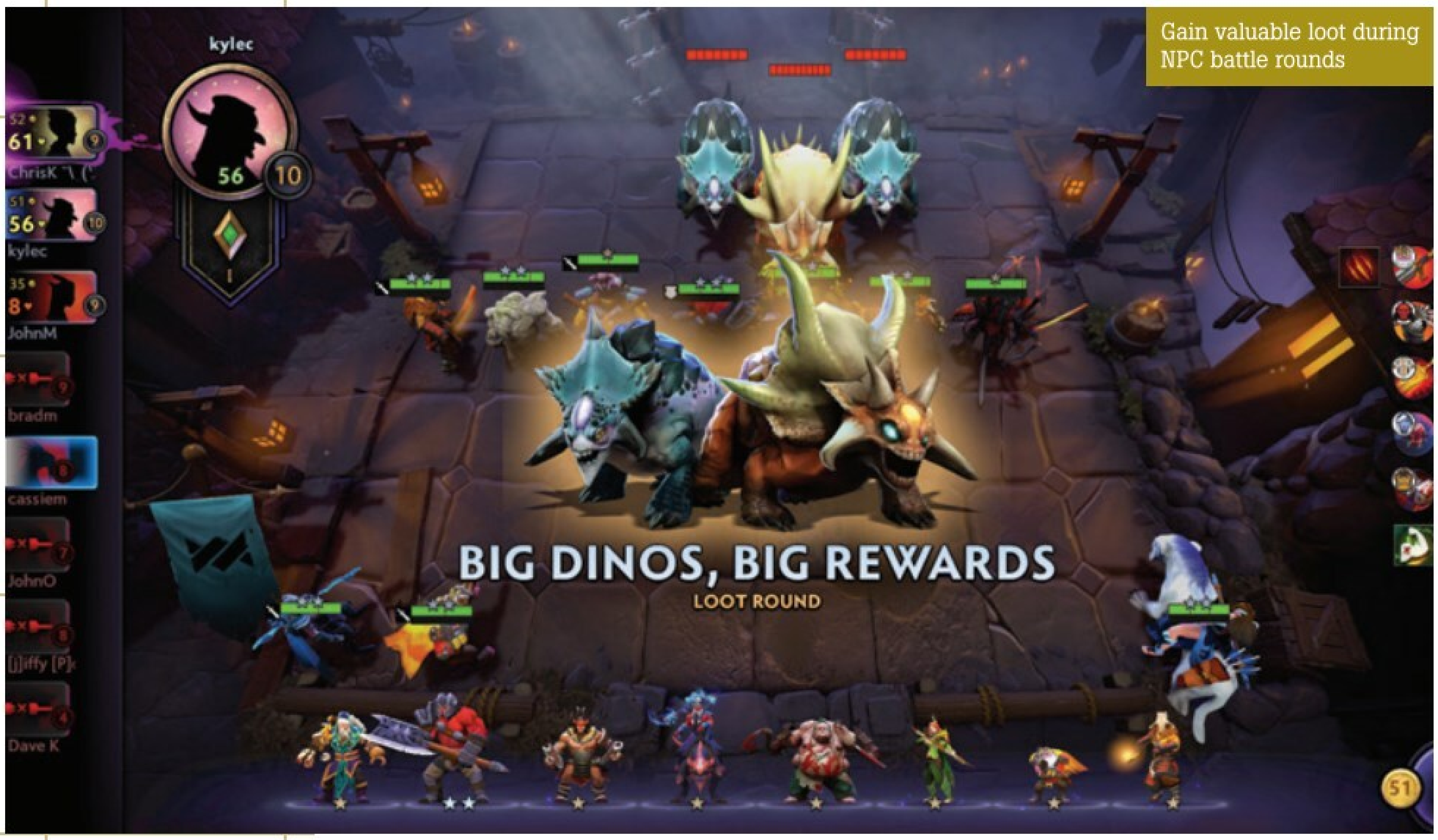
What's An Auto Battler?

Every breakout genre and subgenre has a catalyst to spur on the tide of innovators, imitators, and imagination. Defense of the Ancients rose to popularity as a custom Warcraft III map, leading to the MOBA explosion. In the case of the auto battle genre, Chinese developer Drodo Studio made a custom Dota 2 map called Auto Chess that rapidly attracted players. While some aspects of the game had been seen before on the custom map scene, when it launched this past January, suddenly hundreds of thousands of players found themselves logging into Dota 2 not to play Dota, but to build automated armies.

So how does Auto Chess work? You're essentially a team manager, drafting the best picks from a shared pool to create an unbeatable squad of up to around 10 characters.

While the specifics are different in each iteration of the auto battler, at the core level it's about spending money to build the best team possible from a swath of fantasy archetypes – wizards, warriors, archers, and more. Drawing from mahjong or poker, players can combine three of the same unit to make a more powerful version of the unit. If you somehow manage to acquire three of that upgraded unit, the character evolves yet again into a powerful "tier 3" unit that battles far above its smaller counterparts. However, matching is only one element to assemble a fantastic force. To really succeed, you must match up synergies to unlock special effects and buffs.

For instance, while a single wizard may command a powerful spell, combining the wizard with two or five other wizards can unlock massive, game-altering boosts to how fast those spells become available and to how much damage they deal. Since the wizards might be fragile on their own, perhaps combining them with a frontline archetype could be a plan, like a smattering of warrior or brawler units that buff your troops with additional defenses. Or maybe you combine them


Gain valuable loot during NPC battle rounds

THE BIG PLAYERS RIGHT NOW

DOTA UNDERLORDS

Platform: PC, iOS

Valve's standalone take on the genre, Dota Underlords supports crossplay between Steam and mobile platforms. Tapping into iconic characters and items from the Dota universe allows Valve to build out the template with signature Kunkka boats, Tidehunter ravages, and other fare sure to please Dota fans – though absolutely no knowledge of that game is required to enjoy a match. One of the big draws of the title that differentiates it from the rest of the pack is the underlords themselves – personas you can choose to influence your game decisions at the top level. While the titular underlords aren't yet in the game at the time of this writing, players can already hop into ranked play and unlock a bevvy of cosmetics via a free beta battle pass. Seasonal shifts in the roster aim to keep the game fresh as it moves out of beta and beyond.

AUTO CHESS

Platform: PC, iOS, Android

The original developers of Auto Chess, Drodo Studio, and Dragonest have their own version of the game crafted from the original mod. While it's launching on the Epic Game Store (and very well may already be available there at the time of this writing), the core game is already available on mobile. This version of the game obviously hews extremely close to the original mod, but adds super rare units and gods to spice up the matches. The original devs may have lost the first-mover advantage on PC by taking time to get the game on EGS, but their ideas have shaped the entire genre, so count on them to shake things up yet again when they enter the fray. A lot of pieces are already in place on the mobile platforms, including a ranking system, battle passes, and more cosmetics than you can shake a stick at.

TEAMFIGHT TACTICS

Platform: PC

Riot Games smartly built its auto battler, Teamfight Tactics, right into the League of Legends client, but still lacks the mobile versions that the other two primary games offer. Teamfight Tactics offers a lot of creativity in item combinations and the introduction of a shared draft phase, known as carousel. During the carousel, players compete directly for picks from one rotating carousel of units, with the players further behind in the game getting to pick sooner, and the player in first place going dead last. These units come equipped with gear too, so a last-place player has a huge opportunity to score a big item or a key unit to tier up with.

"I think the biggest thing is the social interactivity between you and the other players in the game," says product lead Richard 'RiotMapleNectar' Henkel. "The fact that we have the 1v1 shared board where you are seeing the other person running around with their Little Legend (avatar) and their animations, we remind you you're in a game with other players. I think that experientially changes the feel of TFT a lot."

Riot is targeting longevity with the concept of sets. Over the course of months, various set changes will bring in other champions and characters that change up available synergies and team compositions. "We imagine that 50 percent of the content in the game may carry over from set one to set two, 25 percent may be different (such as the same champions but different abilities), and 25 percent of it is brand new champions and items and so forth," Henkel says. "We can always tune things like the number of champions in the pool."

Tencent's Chess Rush features co-op play and wild cards

with a class that has no bonus abilities at all, but spawn a massive golem if you have three of them on the field. Using every chunk of your population cap is critical to success, and coming up with various compositions like X Wizards, Y Warriors, Z Shaman is part of the strategic joy of the game. But there's a catch: You never know what's going to appear in your draft pool, so building on the fly and reading what opponents are doing is critical to long-term success beyond attempting to force certain strategies.

Outside of selecting and combining units, managing your "rolls" and economy are critical. While the most obvious use of gold is to purchase new units, your funds can also be used to reroll your current units available for draft or to increase your level, which raises your population cap and makes stronger units appear in your draft queue – you can't see endgame power units until you've reached a high enough level. However, there's a deceptive amount of strategy in these game mechanics as well. If your build relies on crafting high-tier, low-level units, you're probably going to want to stay at a lower level and use rerolls to get your three-star heroes early. If your strategy relies on snagging top-tier expensive units, you may just play with whatever the game puts in front of you while you work on your passive savings, as you receive a small but significant income each round from funds you hold and don't spend.

Between early aggressive rerolling and late-game sandbagging, all manner of approaches and techniques and picking which to embrace varies from game to game and what characters fall into your lap. Each game brings a completely fresh start at zero, with everyone on the same playing field for the vast branches that spawn from humble beginnings. Variety in items and unit availability changing constantly makes for a compelling experience that can play out in myriad ways, making each game unique.

While all current auto battlers come from similar DNA, each company currently in the ring is taking different approaches as they build out the games from more or less the same starting position.

The Widening Playing Field

This explosive boom in auto battlers is likely just beginning. With other players like Tencent pushing out Chess Rush on mobile, which includes co-op, turbo mode, and "wild card" units that can combine with any other, the space is likely to expand fast. Other giant IPs may take advantage of the elegant but simple template, branching things off in their own ways. Imagine a Pokémon auto battler where you combine three Charmanders to make a Charmeleon, or a Blizzard auto battler that lets you combine lesser orcs into a Thrall. While adapting to mobile platforms will likely require some tuning for game length via turbo-play (a standard game can take anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the version and how long you last), the genre is in a great position for PC, as well. Sessions are easy to start with friends, and big tournaments are ready to rock on Twitch.

The auto battler genre will inevitably spur on plenty of trend-chasing and derivative games eager to ride the wave, but some excellent evolving strategy experiences are sure to stand out from the crowd.

Drodo's Auto Chess finds an anchor on mobile devices before heading to the Epic Games Store

Lord Trevor
♥100
♥54
kidplay
♥22
♥19
FAIL
FAIL
0
3/6
COMPETE WITH PLAYERS
WORLDWIDE

AN ONGOING JOURNEY

How Ubisoft has kept Assassin's Creed Odyssey alive

A single-player, story-focused game like Assassin's Creed Odyssey can be a refuge for gamers who don't want to play theoretically infinite battle royales, MMOs, or team-based shooters. If you invest enough time in Ancient Greece, you can complete every quest, get every reward, and explore every location. While that concept is comforting, it doesn't place Odyssey in a completely different space from service-driven titles; regardless of the game, keeping players immersed and excited is important to sustaining interest. Developing a post-launch strategy tailored to the needs of a massive open-world RPG, Ubisoft has spent the months since Odyssey's release rolling out an impressive array of improvements and new content to continually surprise players – and along the way, the process turned a good game into a great one.

by Joe Juba

Developing and releasing Odyssey required hundreds of people spread across multiple studios. The game is staggeringly large, so even though you can technically see everything it offers, completionists can easily spend 200 hours exploring the far corners of the map. So even though Odyssey isn't a multiplayer live-service game, its audience behaves similarly, coming back regularly to continue making progress.

"We knew we had a different type of game, and that people could stay with it and engage with it, so we did approach it a little bit like a multiplayer game in that sense," says creative director Jonathan Dumont. "Every time you return to Odyssey, we wanted there to be changes, new things. We needed a super-strong live structure to support that."

After the game launched on October 5, 2018, Ubisoft transitioned to a different development model to execute its post-launch roadmap. That meant one group focused on creating the Lost Tales of Greece quests, one on quality-of-life changes, and one on the episodic DLC arcs (which are the only paid aspects of the post-release content). Not only did these teams produce plenty of compelling content to expand Odyssey (see sidebar on page 12), but they did so at a consistent pace, ensuring fans' attention wouldn't drift for long.

Sticking to a regular update schedule seems like common sense; it's the goal for just about every team making a live game. Pulling it off is difficult (just look at what happened to Anthem), but the Odyssey team had the agility to make it happen – and some other Ubisoft success stories to learn from. "One of the things we took from the other Ubisoft games that are doing very well – For Honor, Rainbow Six, The Division – is a predictable cadence," says post-launch associate producer Andrée-Anne Boisvert. "At first, every three weeks we were pushing out new title updates with new features, quality-of-life [improvements], bug fixes. Instead of waiting to have a big offering and push it out, that was something relatively new for us."

The contents of the updates come from a mix of deliberate planning and community feedback. In September, prior to Odyssey's launch, Ubisoft released a roadmap that gave timeframes for what would launch and when. But some of the most substantial changes happened outside of those announced milestones, like New Game Plus, an increased level cap, and cosmetic gear customization. Many of those additions were already on the team's radar, but input from players also made a big difference. "Between each of the features, sometimes community suggestions would come in, like the auto-crafting of the arrows, that was not on the roadmap," Boisvert says. "But because the community felt strongly, we would add them earlier than some other features. So the important thing is having an idea of what you want, but then being flexible."

The Big Changes

Almost every update to Assassin's Creed Odyssey contains a variety of small tweaks and fixes, but they aren't the star attractions. The changes that have the biggest impact are the ones that give players new options and content to enhance their experience. Of everything that has been added to the game since launch, these are the most significant improvements.

- **Legacy of the First Blade (paid DLC):** An episodic tale that chronicles the player's interaction with a Persian assassin and his family.
- **The Fate of Atlantis (paid DLC):** The final story arc dives deeper into the modern-day plot and reveals much about the series' precursor civilization.
- **The Lost Tales of Greece:** A series of (sometimes irreverent) quests that help flesh out the characters and world.
- **New Game Plus:** Start the story over while retaining your level, gear, and bonuses. You can also re-select your hero for a different perspective.
- **Cosmetic gear customization:** Keep the stats of your best weapons and armor, but make them look like any corresponding piece of gear.
- **Button remapping:** An accessibility option that lets you customize your layout and decide which buttons perform each action.
- **Level cap raised to 99:** Enemy scaling helps maintain an appropriate challenge as you continue gaining levels and ability points.
- **Storage chest:** Declutter your inventory by stowing what's too good to sell, but not good enough to carry around constantly.
- **Mastery levels:** When you've invested in all the abilities you like, mastery levels let you put your points into a series of passive bonuses.
- **Multiple gear loadouts:** Create equipment setups for different situations, then swap among them from the inventory menu.
- **Story creator:** Create and share your own quests with this online tool. You can also play what other community members have made.

Characters and locations that didn't get enough attention in the main game had additional time in the spotlight through the Lost Tales of Greece. Accessibility features made it easier for all players to customize their experience. Weekly and monthly events (like new mercenaries and epic ships to take down) provided new goals to chase. With all of these updates, Dumont struggles to think of any additions that were completely off the table … but then he remembers one. "I wanted a Kraken in the ocean, but it was too complicated," he laughs. "It was too complex for the ship to handle."

Apart from the episodic DLC, all players have access to Odyssey's improvements for no additional charge. However, the game has a storefront in which players can purchase costumes, boosters, and maps with real money. The team aimed to make these microtransactions unobtrusive and optional, and Dumont says the game was not designed with an agenda of driving players toward them. "The thing we did to start with is we made a super-long adventure," he says. "I wanted this to feel like an endless odyssey when you're playing it; I wanted you to be able to lose yourself … but if people want to shortcut it, it's there if you want to do it. The game is not built for microtransactions – it has a lot of length and reward schemes [on its own]."

Also noteworthy is the fact that Ubisoft has stuck to the previously announced roadmap, so the success of microtransactions one way or the other seems to have little impact on the support Odyssey receives. "Either way, we have a plan, and we try to stick to it and push new content to our players at a regular cadence," Boisvert says.

With almost a year of continuous support, Odyssey's ongoing life is beginning to wind down; Ubisoft has made no announcements about extending it beyond the initial roadmap. The final DLC episode released on July 16, wrapping up the official story ("For Kassandra and Alexios, for Odyssey, it's the last chapter of what you'll be experiencing as them," Dumont says). The Lost Tales of Greece are almost done. The Discovery Tour – an educational mode that essentially turns Odyssey's version of Ancient Greece into an interactive museum – is slated to release sometime this fall. But even if official updates slow down, players can continue to get new content thanks to the recently released story creator. This online tool allows players to create and upload their own quests, effectively turning Odyssey into a community platform going forward.Assassin's Creed Odyssey isn't perfect, but its flaws seem to have grown smaller with time, shrinking relative to the volume of smart features and amenities the team has added. Not only do the updates make an already-huge world even bigger, but they highlight Odyssey's strengths and give players new ways to interact with its gorgeous setting and intense combat. Though Assassin's Creed Origins also had post-launch support, Odyssey represents Ubisoft's fully realized strategy to improve a game and add value for months after release. "If you bought Odyssey, we wanted you to be there as long as possible for our single-player journey," Dumont says. "The results are there for us, and we're really happy with the engagement of people with the game." ◆

OUTER WILDS

The long-gestating space exploration game Outer Wilds finally released this year to emerge as one of 2019's diamonds in the rough. The game's focus on non-linear exploration, dark sense of humor, and a time-loop premise have endeared itself to many virtual astronauts the world over. We spoke with art director Wesley Martin and tech artist Logan Ver Hoff about the long process of releasing Mobius Digital's sci-fi epic into the wild. *by Javy Gwaltney*

How long was Outer Wilds in development?
Wesley Martin: Three to four years. With his thesis, the original designer, Alex Beachum, wanted to make a game with real-world space exploration, where it's much more about exploring for the sake of knowledge and no extrinsic rewards. So it was sort of an experiment to see, like, can you make a game that doesn't reward players in any way other than just the joy of exploring?

Logan Ver Hoff: He submitted a polished alpha to the Indie Games Festival and won top honors. He had started Mobius with another designer and they made some mobile games, but once Outer Wilds won that prize, they decided to just make a full version with an ending and bunch of art and all that. Our crowdfunding campaign went well and Annapurna [Interactive] became interested in the project. We signed a deal with them that catapulted the game's scale by about 10 times.

How many people are at Mobius and worked on Outer Wilds?
WM: We're currently sitting at eight full-timers. We had a few contractors working on the game too, like six artists.

How has the team taken to the warm reception?
WM: We've obviously been excited about it for a long time. Even when it was in alpha we believed in it. But we also felt crazy for the last four years, trying to tell people about it. And like, no one understood what we were talking about. Seeing other people get it for the first time is really exciting.

LV: It really feels like all the last three years have been worth it. It almost felt like whiplash when people responded to it so positively. I think I spent the first 72 hours watching people stream it. That's definitely bad for your brain … but it's really great for self-esteem!

How hard was it to design a clue-based progression system?
LV: As a studio, we are very design- and playtesting-focused. Even throughout development early on, we had playtests every other week, getting people to sit down and go through reading all the clues and stuff like that. We spent a long time piecing together how people would understand where to go. The big breakthrough was probably about a year ago, when we added in the rumor mode to the ship. Before then, people would read things and not know what to do with it. Putting down breadcrumbs really helped the game to become way more accessible for the average gamer.

WM: It was all tricky to do because we couldn't explicitly ever tell the player to do something. That was one of the things Alex learned during his thesis was that as soon as you tell the player and give them an explicit goal, you've completely lost them; they will never self-direct for the rest of the experience. So yeah, the ship log was a huge effort: It took a lot of intense brainstorming to figure out how to walk that line of something that helps players self-direct.

Why the time loop structure?
WM: That was actually part of Alex's thesis. One of the main reasons for the looping was to explore the idea of change over time. Because with an exploration game, things are more interesting if the environments are dynamic and changing. Having a reset button also allows the player to explore different states of destruction.

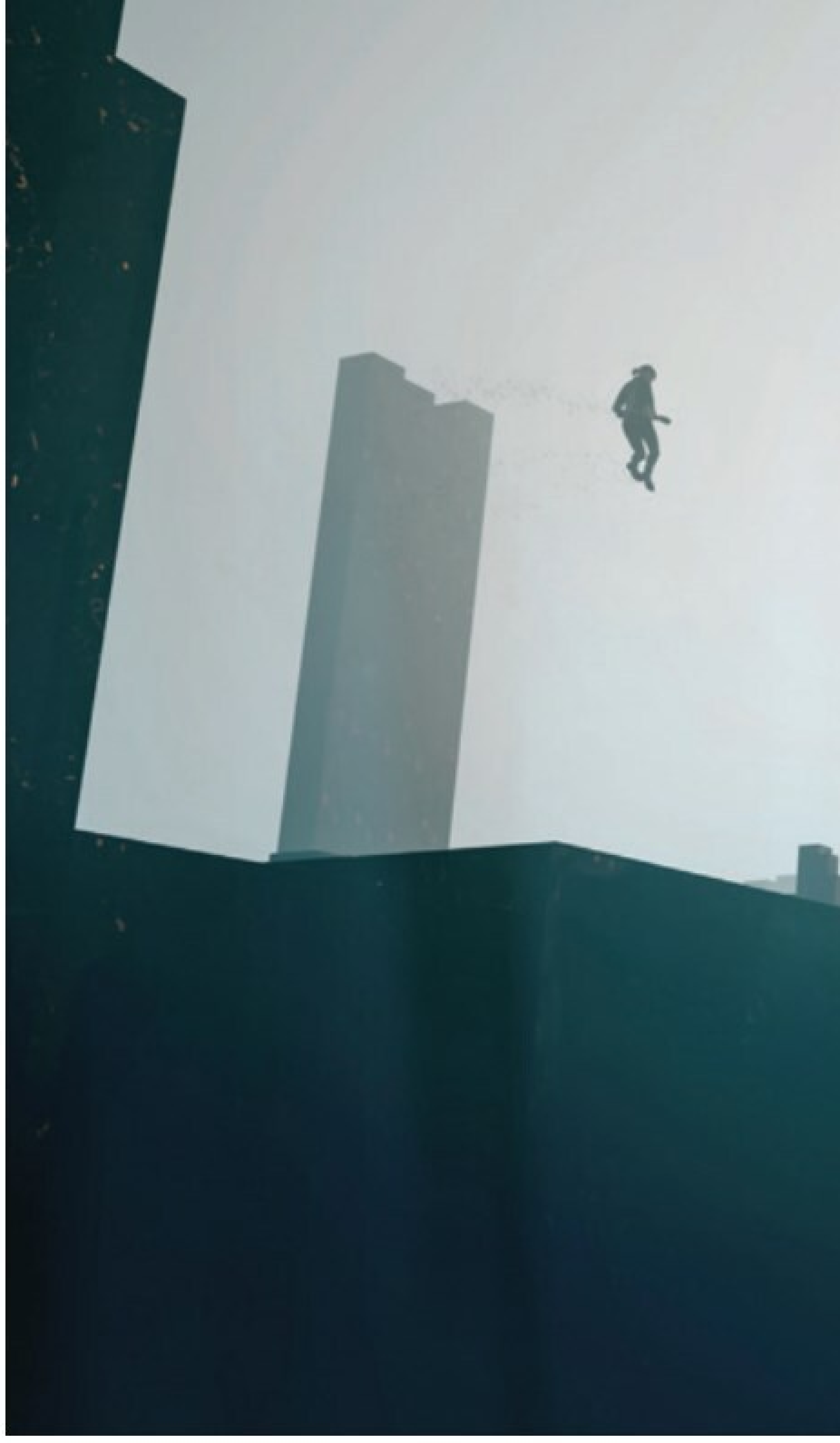
What was the hardest location to put together?
WM: One internal joke we had was that Brittle Hollow was the final boss for us on the development side just because of how resource intense it was for the art team to make. It was also the most technically difficult system to set up, and it was also the most difficult place to level design.

LV: Yeah, there was still a lot of tweaking going on in the final hours just because we were like, "Oh my god, we need these parts to collapse at these exact points." I also remember the Ash twin being really difficult with the cave systems [and the rising sand levels].

Outer Wilds has giant interstellar anglerfish that will gobble you up. Why?
WM: That was actually from one of the early prototypes that Alex did for his thesis. It was in this weird asteroid field with mushrooms. Their design just stuck in the final game.

LV: Yeah, [they're] kind of an iconic part. During his thesis, Alex worked on these prototypes that would eventually become Outer Wilds, and for one of them he just wanted to have the experience of [the player] moving toward the lights in fog, except maybe some of the lights are harmful.

What's next?
WM: We can't talk about long-term things, but we've already released a couple of patches and we're working on another one right now that's going to add a new feature we're excited about. So yeah, we're still supporting the game.



The Logo Luminary

Graphic designer Cory Schmitz has become the premier designer for video game and studio logos

by Ben Hanson

IF YOU'VE BEEN FOLLOWING GAMES over the past several years, you've seen Cory Schmitz's work – it's everywhere. You see it when you watch a trailer for Ghost of Tsushima, try an Oculus Rift, or buy the vinyl soundtrack to Rez Infinite. Competing with larger marketing agencies, Cory Schmitz has carved a niche as the leading freelance graphic designer to hire when creating logos in the games industry. "As opposed to an agency, I actually know a lot about games," Schmitz says.

Though he grew up playing games like Super Mario 64, Schmitz felt his future career click into place when playing Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty and noticing details like the in-game logos and bold game over screen. "MGS 2 really got the ball rolling for me for some reason … I would get really into the graphic design from games, like the menus in Metal Gear games were a big inspiration. The menus in Ridge Racer Type 4 are stuck in my head, or stuff from the [graphic design studio] Designer's Republic in Wipeout. It all stuck with me in a weird way and I was like, 'Why not do video game stuff?'"

After working on 2012's Sound Shapes, a series of connections kicked off by Capybara Games' Nathan Vella led Schmitz to working with companies like Naughty Dog and video game website *Polygon*. "My contact at Oculus was a fan of the *Polygon* logo. So you're really starting with small, tiny initiatives and through a combination of luck, privilege, or whatever, it kept escalating into bigger and bigger things," Schmitz says. Being a fan of games comes in handy for projects like designing the logo for the retro console the Analogue Nt, where he knew he had to make a "new, timeless console logo" that could stand proudly on shelves. "Seeing a logo printed on hardware is pretty overwhelming," he says.

Despite so many companies seeing something special in his work, Schmitz is modest and has a difficult time summarizing his style. "I get called minimalist all the time," he says. "I guess sometimes I do really simple logos. Like obviously the Oculus and Insomniac logos are pretty simple, but I do a lot of stuff with tons of texture and little bits everywhere so it's not minimalist at all!" Custom typography and "high-contrast" imagery are two pillars he has stuck to throughout his career. He says the trick to graphic design (other than lots of practice and Photoshop tutorials) is to keep your eyes open. Schmitz uses an archive on Tumblr with thousands of images to help inspire him for new projects, filled with things like new game menus and old Japanese key art. "I like to internalize what I really find beautiful and try to reflect that in my work ... I really like bold stuff a lot. I try to introduce left-field elements, but it doesn't always end up there, because at the

The Schmitz Files

Cory Schmitz has designed dozens of well-known logos in the game industry. Here is a selection showing his versatility

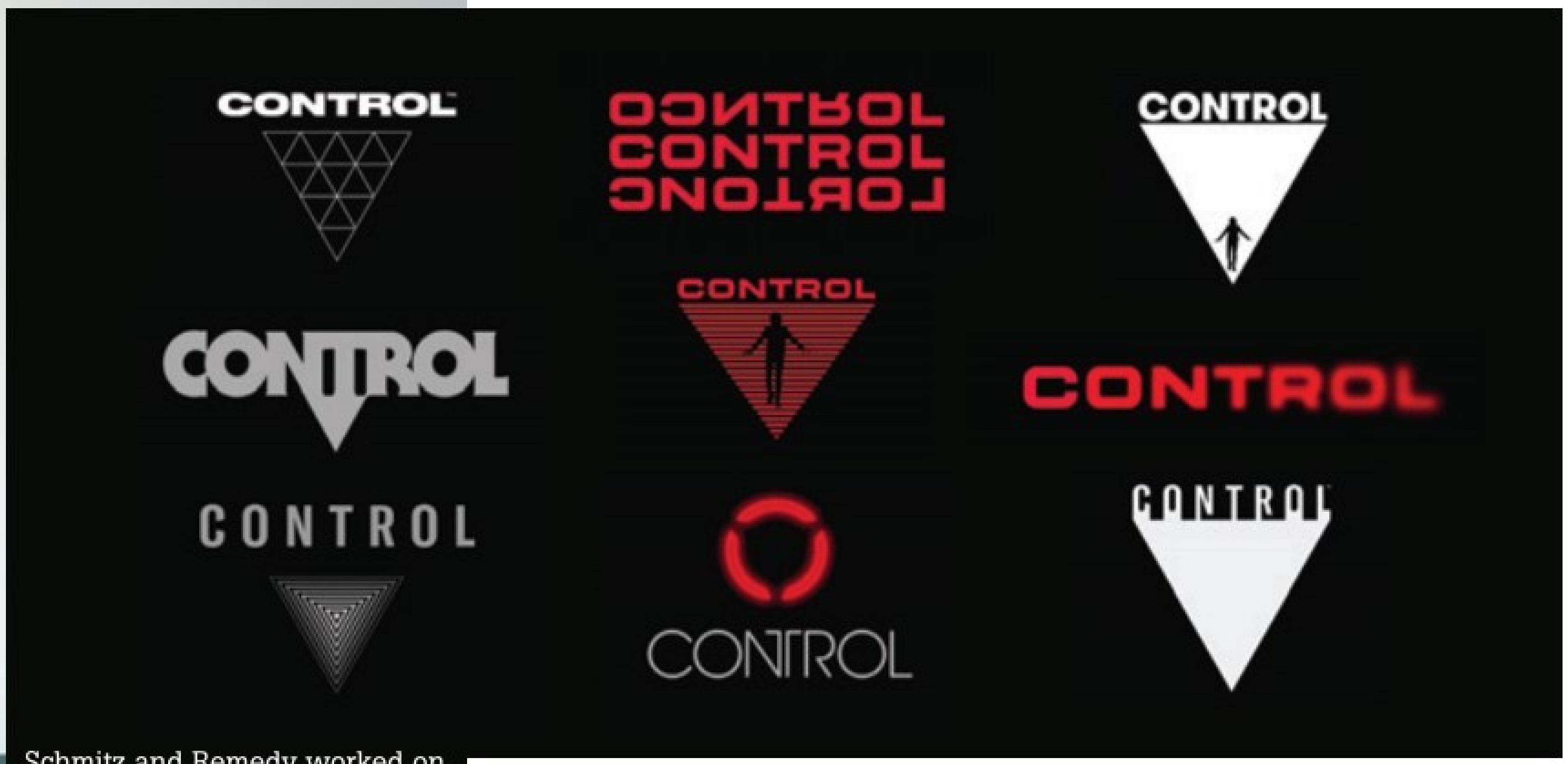
HARMONIX MUSIC VR

PSYCHONAUTS 2

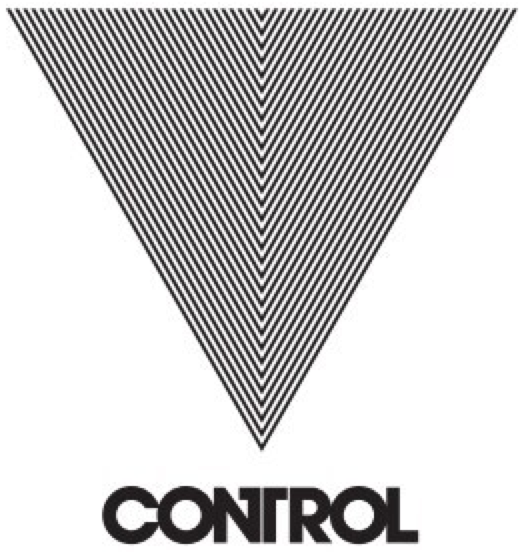
BELOW

INSOMNIAC GAMES

AUDICA



Schmitz and Remedy worked on several iterations of the Control logo, settling on the Brutalist inspired one to the right



end of the day I have to get approval.”

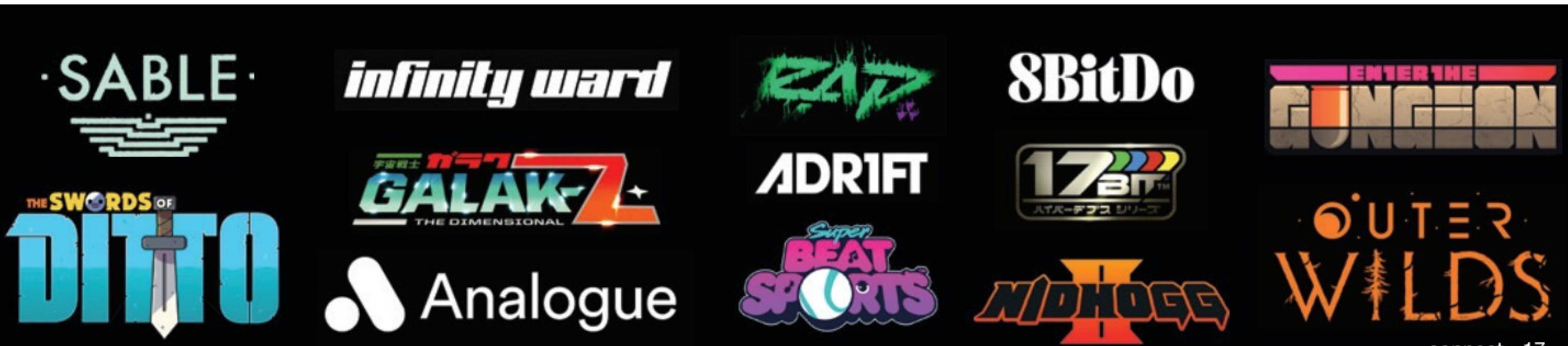
He’s quick to say every company and project is different, but typically designing a game logo begins with him receiving a creative brief in which they explain the vibe of the game. “I try to just reflect what I hear from the brief into the logo and insert a bit of my own style too,” Schmitz says. “For instance, the Control logo ... The building that [the game takes place] in (The Oldest House) has extremely brutalist architecture, so I wanted to encapsulate that in the logo. We have that triangle thing, extremely geometric, really cold, no humanist flair to it. It tries to be a reflection of the game. That’s an ideal project where you have all these themes to pull from.”

Schmitz typically pitches four to 10 initial logos, then iterates with feedback. Then he boils things down to one or two options before polishing the final design.

“The Oculus one took a ton of time. It’s something you really want to get right,” Schmitz says. “It was me and a few other people on it, and I feel like we must have made over 1,000 different [logos] ... Then it turns out so simple, which is funny. It’s just a circle. And everyone is like, ‘Oh man, that must have taken you like five seconds!’” He stresses that designers need to think about the practicality of logos; they need to cleanly come across on anything from a billboard to a Twitter icon, so going for a clear, simple design often works better. It helps if it’s something you can inject meaning into; he brings up the ambiguity of the Oculus logo, “Is that an eye, or is that the headset shape, or is that an O for Oculus?”

In addition to designing new work, Schmitz also modernizes logos for companies like Insomniac and Infinity Ward. How do companies know when it’s time to refresh a logo? “It’s just a feeling. When you go for something super stylized back in the day, that’s when it tends to get older-looking quicker,” he says. Back in 2014 Sony’s Santa Monica Studio was looking to branch out and develop more than just God of War, developing a now-canceled sci-fi game codenamed Internal-7 and helping out with indie projects like Unfinished Swan and Hohokum. The studio needed a new logo that was more flexible. “We worked our way towards a radiating, simple S shape. It’s meant to be abstract,” Schmitz says. “We had the logo so we could change the colors to reflect the game. Like the Unfinished Swan version is black and white, perfect. And they did this later, but on the God of War box art it’s white and then one of the little angle things is red and it looks just like Kratos’ face. Really clever … It’s kind of like that ‘a-ha’ moment. That’s the feeling I’m chasing when I’m making these logos.”

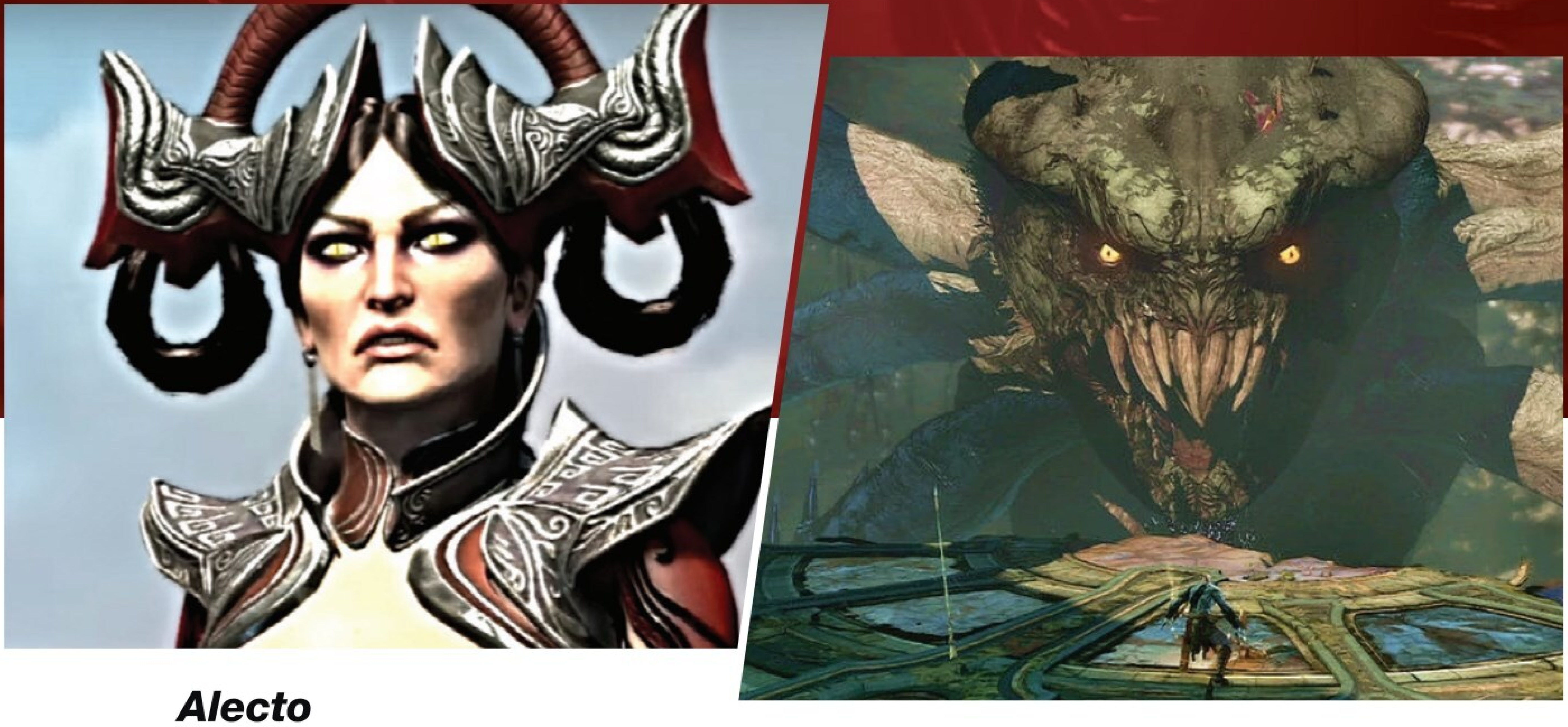
Schmitz feels confident his game logos will stand the test of time. “I don’t see how the Oculus logo won’t age well. Where do you go from there?” From falling in love with the thin, blue PlayStation 2 logo (“It just felt so cool, it felt like it fell from space or something,” he says) to seeing the logo he worked on for Days Gone covering an endcap in Target, Schmitz’s visual impact on the video game industry is only growing. He says he hasn’t yet talked to Sony about its plans for the next generation, but he’s already dreaming about the future. “I don’t even know if it’s called the PlayStation 5 or not, but it has occurred to me that it would be interesting to try to figure out what that logo looks like and I have doodled it,” Schmitz says with a laugh. ◆



You Won’t Like Them When They’re Angry

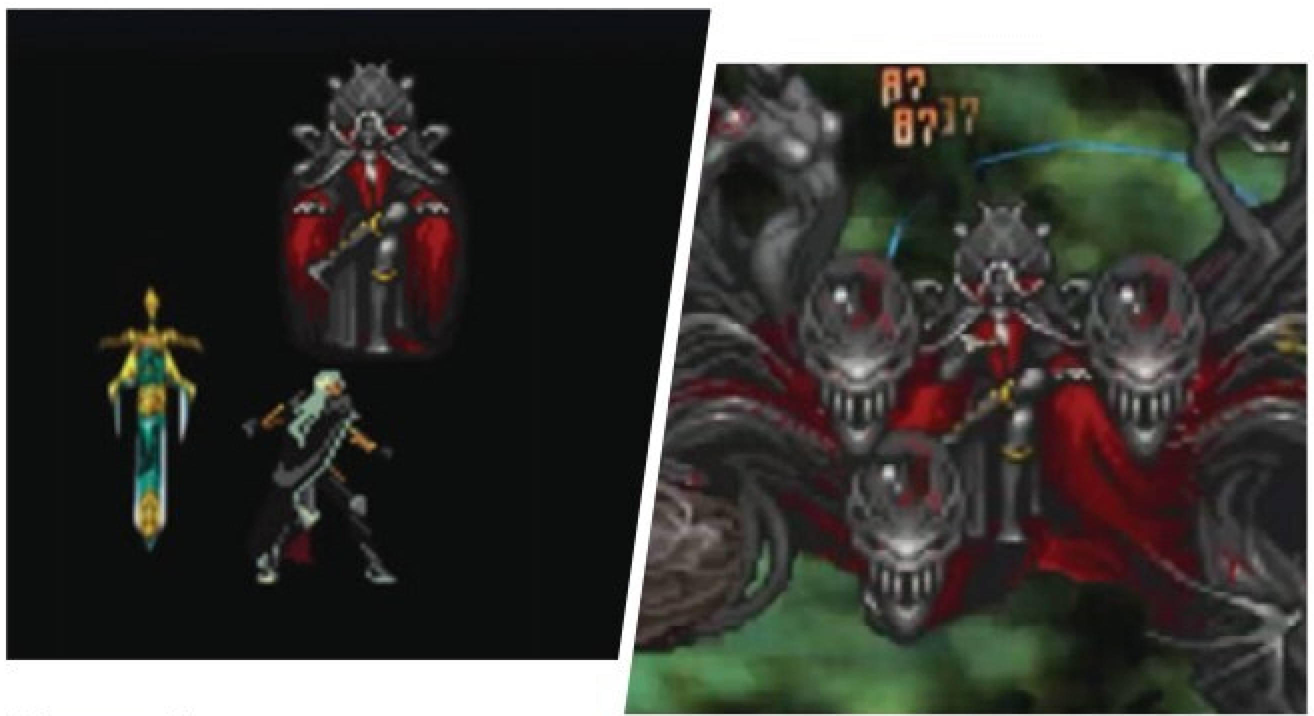
A round-up of larger-than-life boss transformations that you likely didn’t see coming

by Andrew Reiner



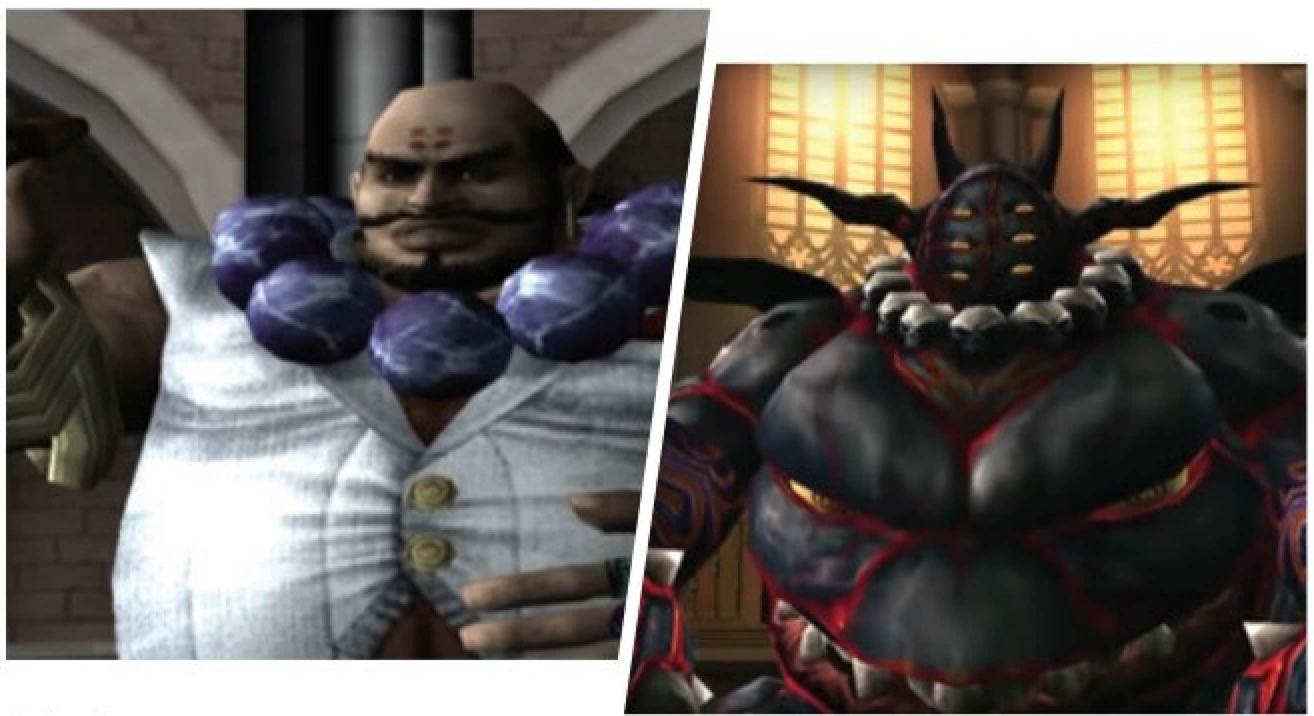
Alecto

Throughout most of God of War Ascension, the antagonist Alecto wears regal and revealing attire. When Kratos finally corners her, she transforms into a Godzilla-sized sea creature with thrashing tentacles.



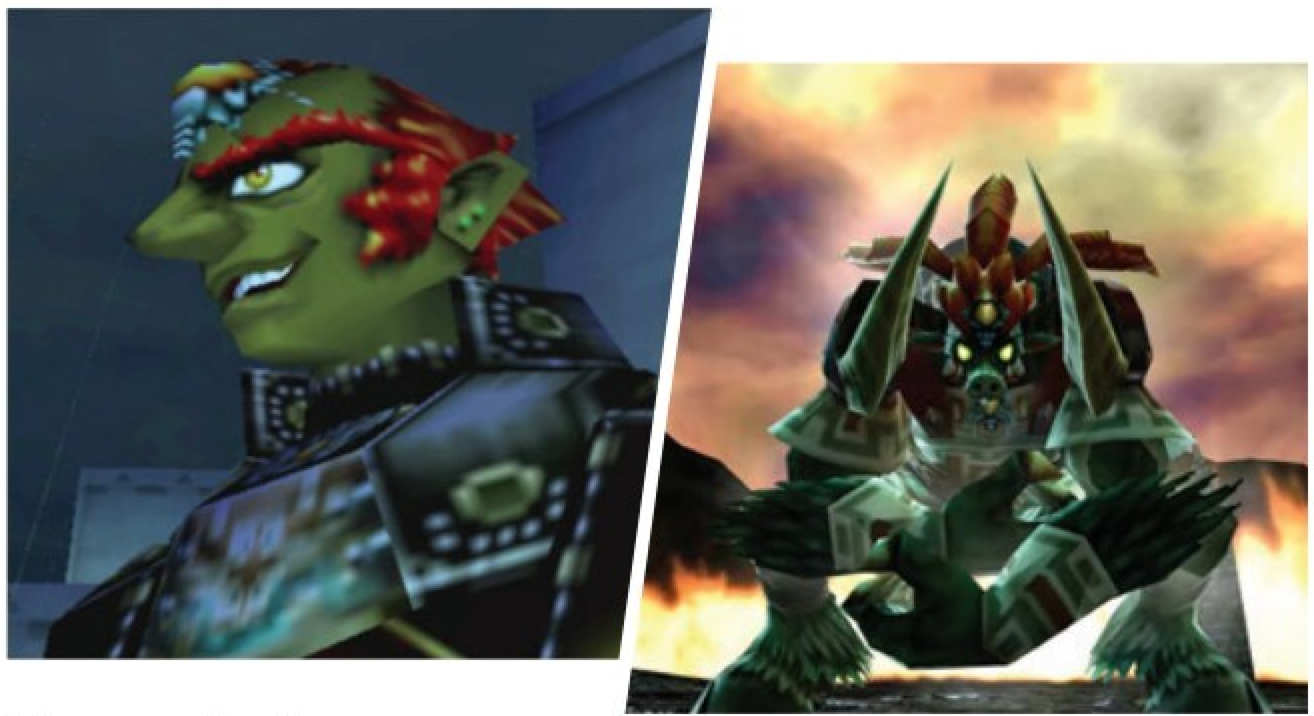
Dracula

In Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, we see Dracula morph from a lazy throne-sitting vampire to a weird space creature that looks like it was designed by H.R. Giger. This isn’t the only time Dracula transformed. In the MSX2 version of Castlevania (called Vampire Killer), he released his essence into a huge painting of himself that couldn’t do much other than blink its eyes and open its mouth to release swarms of bats.



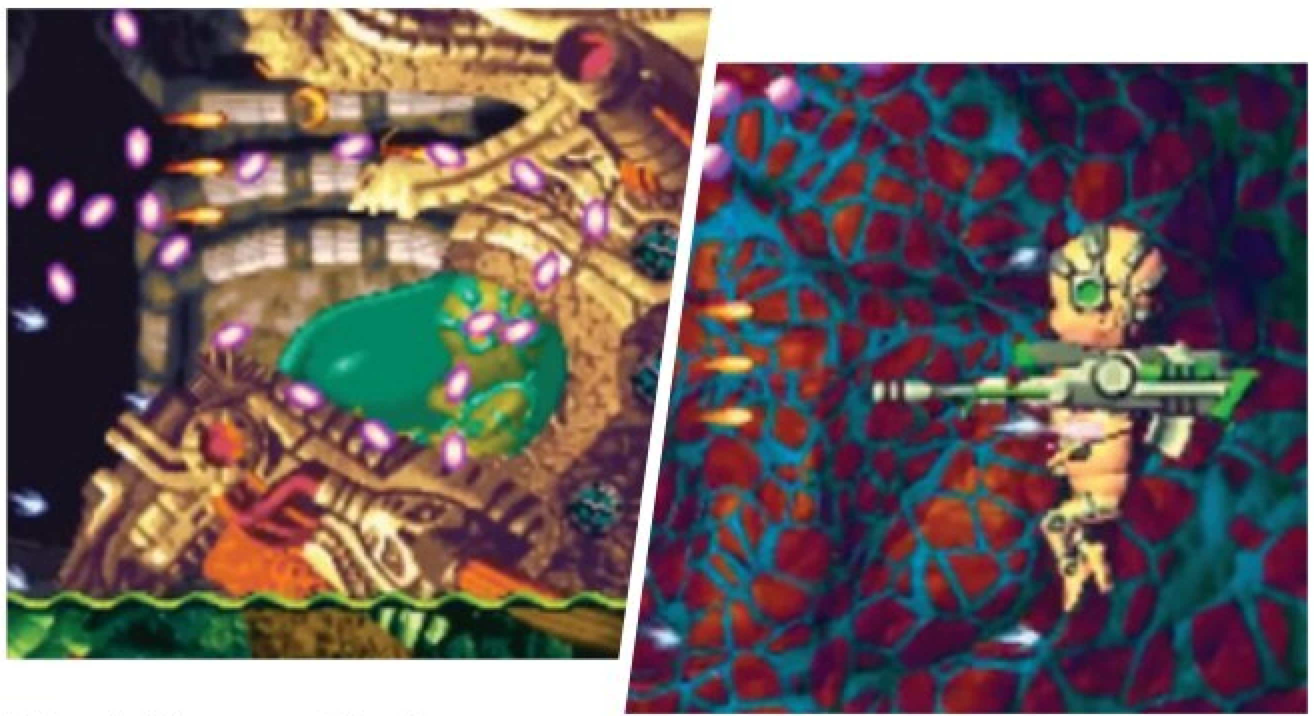
Elvis

God Hand is a ridiculous game, so strange occurrences should be expected, but one villain’s transformation is a huge surprise. For most of the game, the bad guy known as Elvis serves the role of comic relief. He smokes a cigar, makes strange jokes, and accidentally falls through the floor when you first meet him. He eventually transforms into a demon with mouths on his hands, chest, and who knows where else.



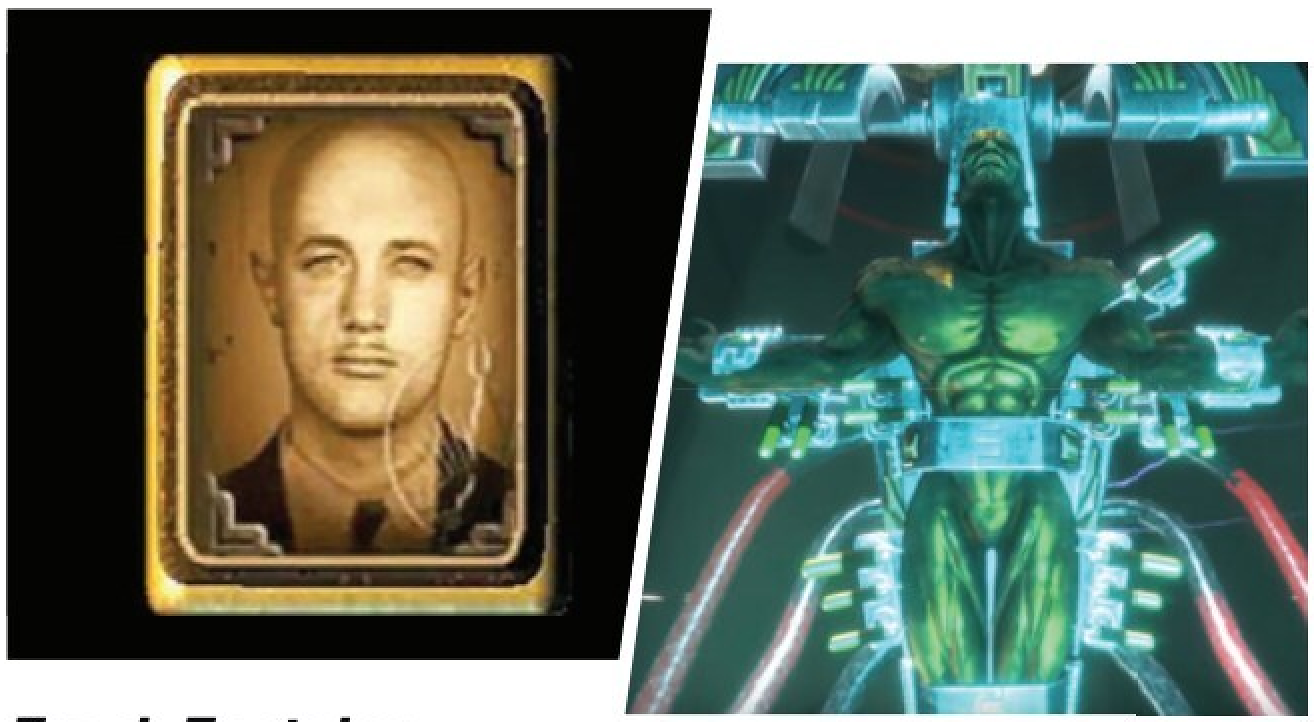
Ganondorf

Across Zelda's history, Ganon has been a blue pig, a human, a rampaging beast, and more, but Ocarina of Time is, arguably, his most radical transformation. After collapsing a cathedral on his head, Ganondorf bursts from the rubble and grows multiple stories tall, adopting his iconic pig snout for the final confrontation.



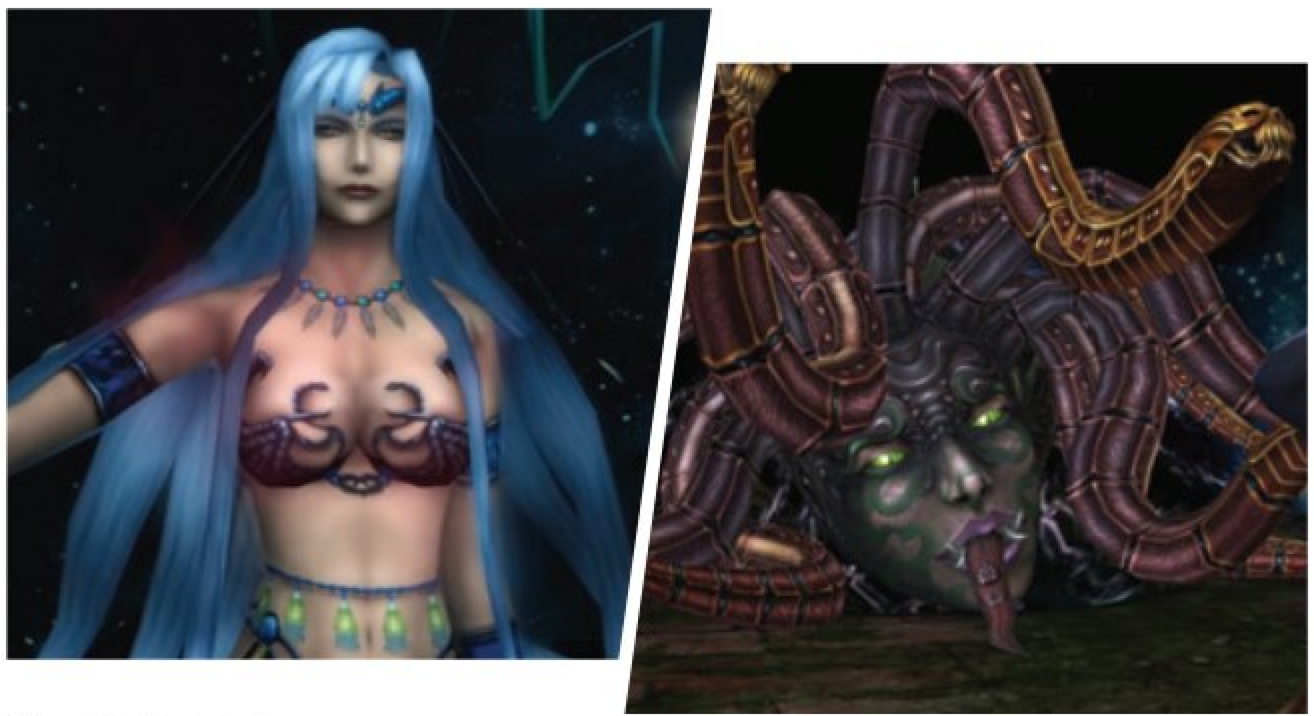
That Space Baby

In the Neo Geo game Blazing Star, one of the bosses begins as a strange device that shoots bullets, but you quickly realize it's pregnant with a humanoid baby. When the device is weakened, you travel into its womb to take on the baby, which shoots lasers out of its eyes and eventually dual wields guns.



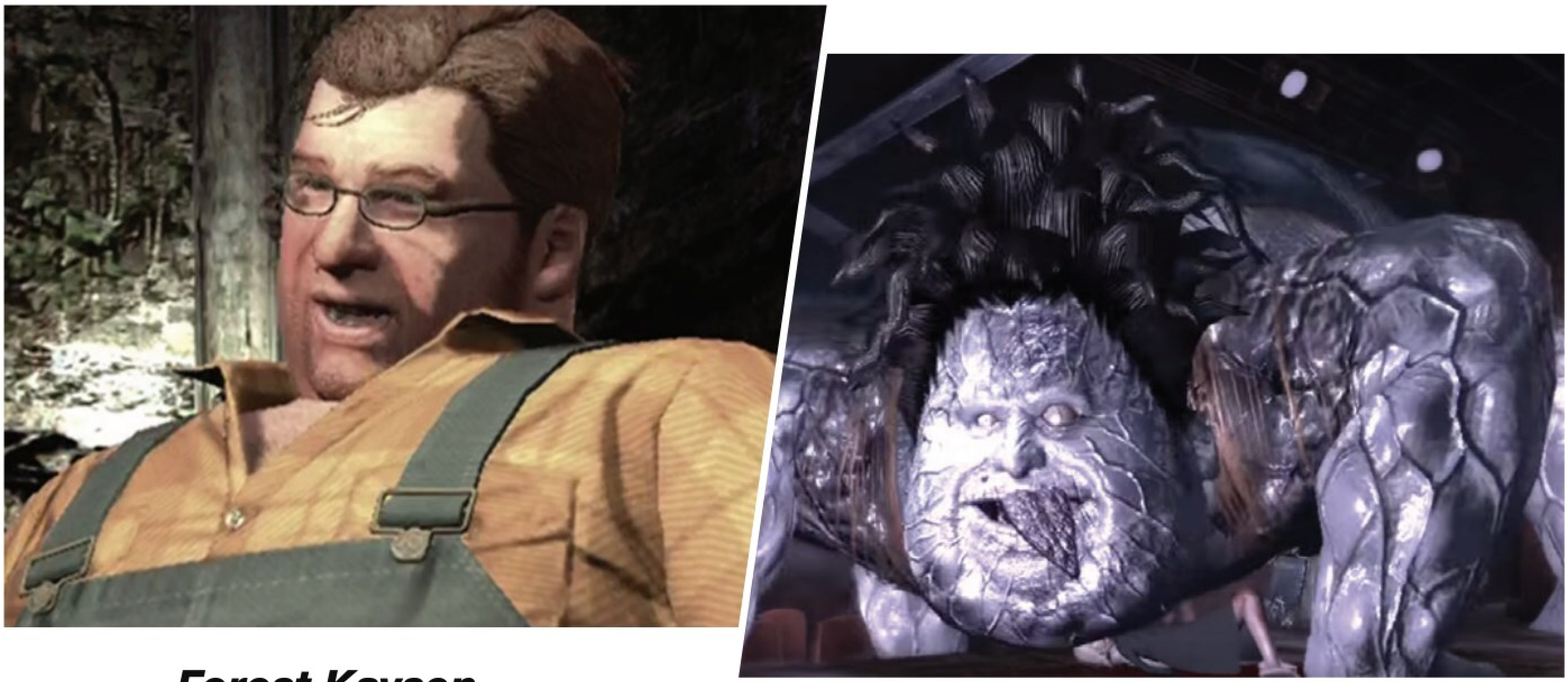
Frank Fontaine

For most of BioShock, Frank Fontaine is an ordinary-looking bald guy with a Bronx accent. When you finally confront Frank, you see he's hopped up on Adam and now resembles the Incredible Hulk more than the intelligent man who once had a chance at ruling Rapture.



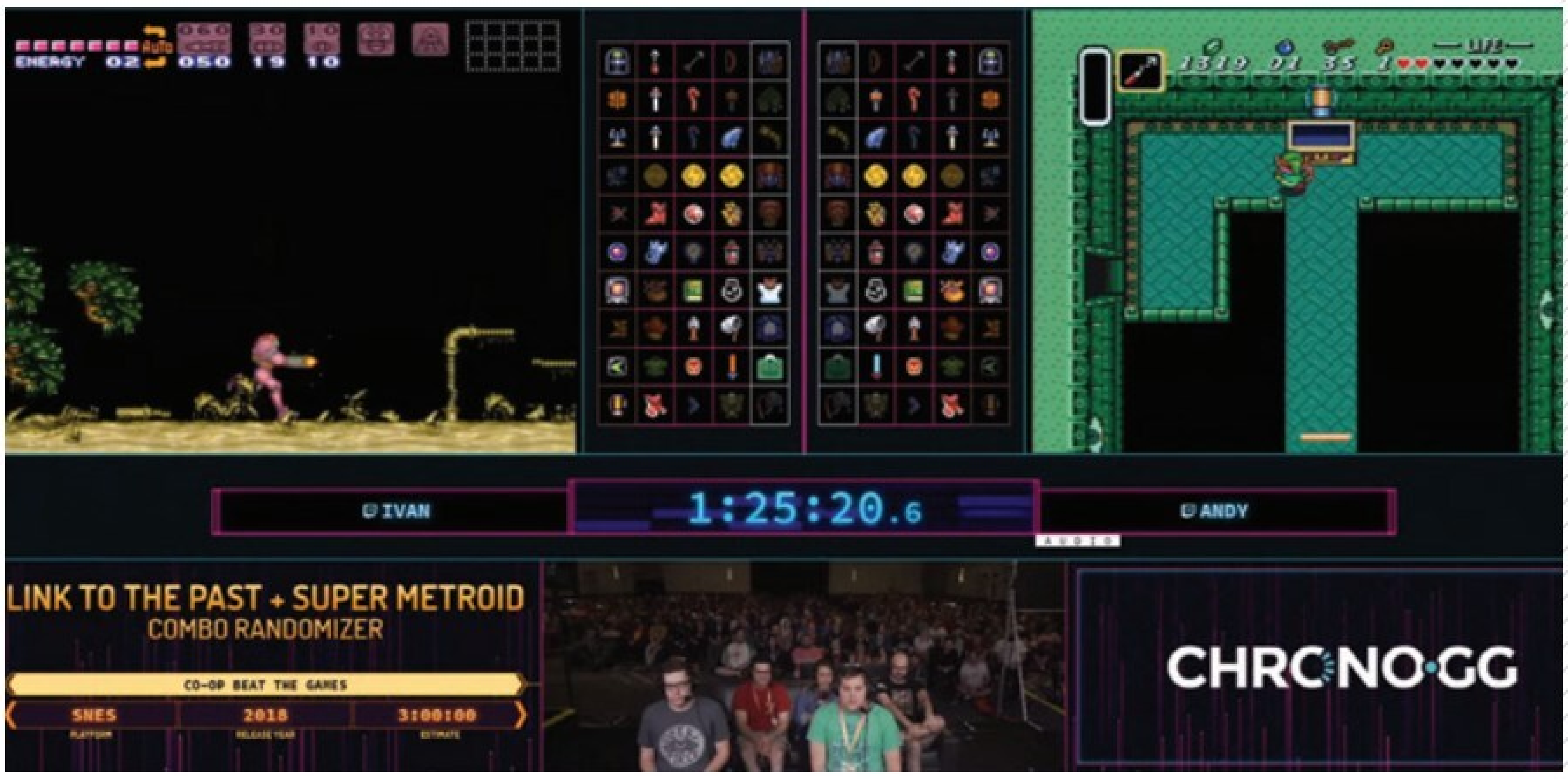
Yunalesca

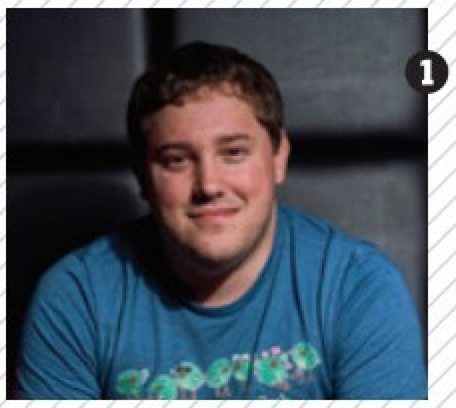
Appearing as though she takes great care of her flowing blue hair, Yunalesca is a boss in Final Fantasy X that transforms three times. Her final form makes her look like a giant Medusa, with metal snakes replacing her precious hair.

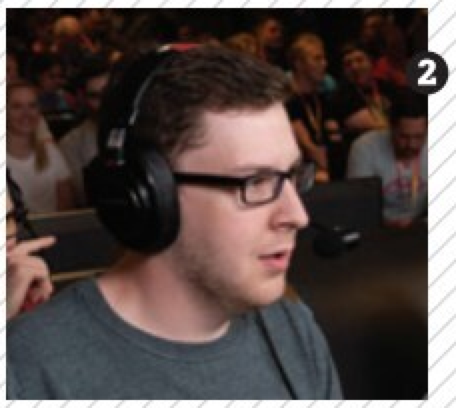


Forest Kaysen

When you first meet Forest Kaysen in Deadly Premonition, he seems like the most trustworthy person in town. Forest sadly has a dark side and eventually turns into a Beetlejuice spider. If that grotesquerie wasn't bad enough, he also changes into a bloated ball that bounces around a theater as well as a giant who stands roughly 100 feet in height.







Taking A Chance On The Classics

Two speedrunners take a crack at a mod that turns revered Zelda and Metroid games into one strange experience

After years of speedrunning The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past and Super Metroid, Ivan McCormick and Andy Laso found a new way to enjoy their favorite games: randomizers, which jumble the locations of most items strewn around the world. This forced them to learn and implement new optimized routes with each playthrough, breathing new life into the games. But why stop there? Why not start playing a franken-game where items from one could be found in another and certain doors warp you between Hyrule and Zebes? And why not run the randomizer together, in front of a live audience and more than 100,000 online viewers at this year's Summer Games Done Quick event?

Name:
Andy Laso ❶

Occupation:
Streamer

Twitch:
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Twitter:
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Name:
Ivan McCormick ❷

Occupation:
Real Estate Appraisal

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Twitter:
@SRL_Ivan

by Suriel Vazquez

What did you think of randomizers when you first encountered them?
Andy Laso: It was a pretty big surprise. During the Link to the Past randomizer's original development, I thought it was a bad idea, and it was going to be super boring. Then it finally comes out, and I just brush it off like, "Maybe I'll do [a run of it] eventually." [Then] a bunch of my friends from the Link to the Past speedrunning community were doing a big ol' race. Once I decided to join, I was like, "Oh my god, this is so much fun." Three years later, here we are.

What's the biggest adjustment you have to make when playing a randomized version of a game?
Ivan McCormick: There's just a lot more thought that goes into it. It's not just muscle memory taking over, doing the exact same thing over and over again. Every [randomized] seed is different. You need to adjust your play according to certain item locations, and figuring out what the best next decision can be.

Is there anything about Super Metroid and A Link to the Past that makes them a good fit for a combo randomizer?
IM: Honestly, Super Metroid by itself does not work well as a randomizer. I think that A Link to the Past does, just because of the diverse item pool and the different routing options that the game gives you in every seed. But combined, it makes it a lot more interesting on the Super Metroid side, because of the different warps [between] both games.

What's the biggest learning curve specific to running these two games at the same time like this?
IM: It's probably the weird situations you can be put in. Because with the way you can get to either game, there can be some very strange situations you'd never normally have to do in either of the vanilla randomizers of each game, just to transfer between games in certain areas.

In one of the first seeds Andy and I co-op'ed, our required access to the dark world was through the portal in Maridia that takes you to the dark world ice-rod cave. It's just a situation that you'd never put into in a normal ALTTP randomizer, so we had to really consider how the warps could work to our advantage from that point on.

Are there are other kinds of games that could work with randomizers?
IM: It really varies from game to game. I know the Pokémon randomizers are super popular, and they work really well. But there's one for Mega Man X that I just don't understand how that would be enjoyable personally for me, I'm sure some people enjoy it. I think that collect-a-thons, or Metroidvanias like Super Metroid and Link to the Past are just more suited for it, in general.

g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

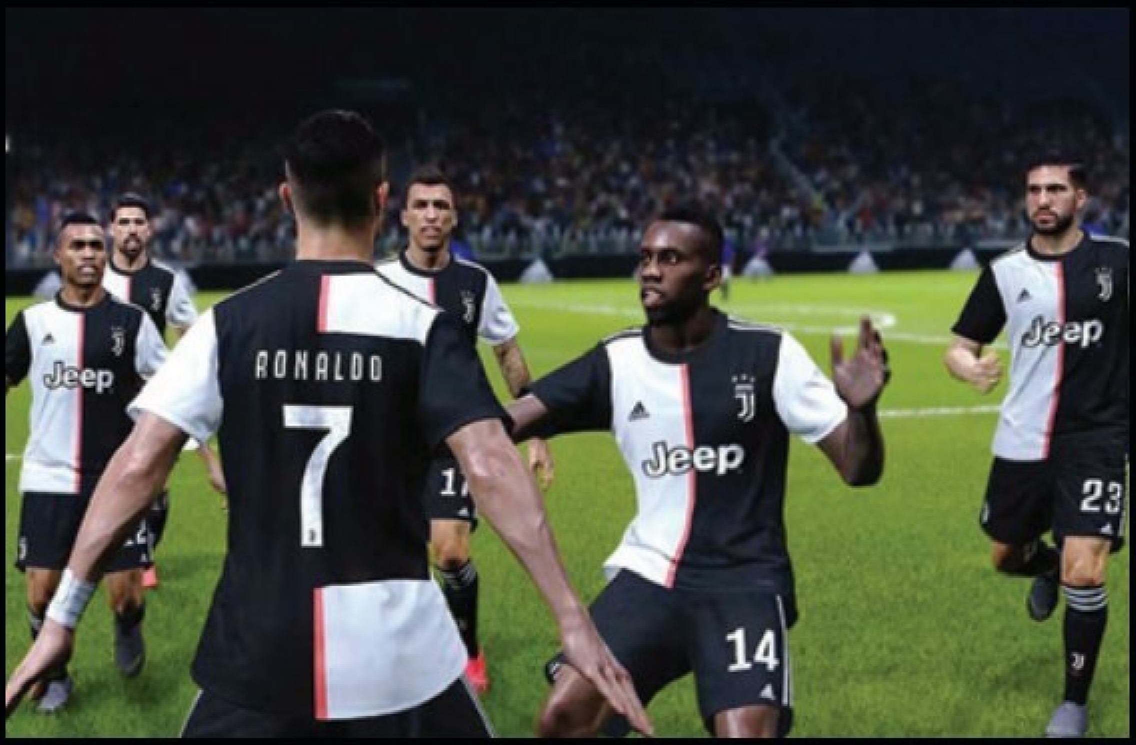
The Good

Nintendo is releasing the **SWITCH LITE** on September 20 for $199. The Lite is a smaller, handheld-only version of the Switch whose controls are built into the unit. The portable does not connect to a TV nor come with detachable Joy-Con controllers, although they can be used for games that do not support handheld mode.

The Bad

TIM WILLITS, longtime level designer and studio director at id Software, is leaving the company after 24 years. Willits has worked on everything from the Quake series to the Doom reboot, and recently Rage 2. We offer our best wishes to Willits in his new endeavor.

The Ugly

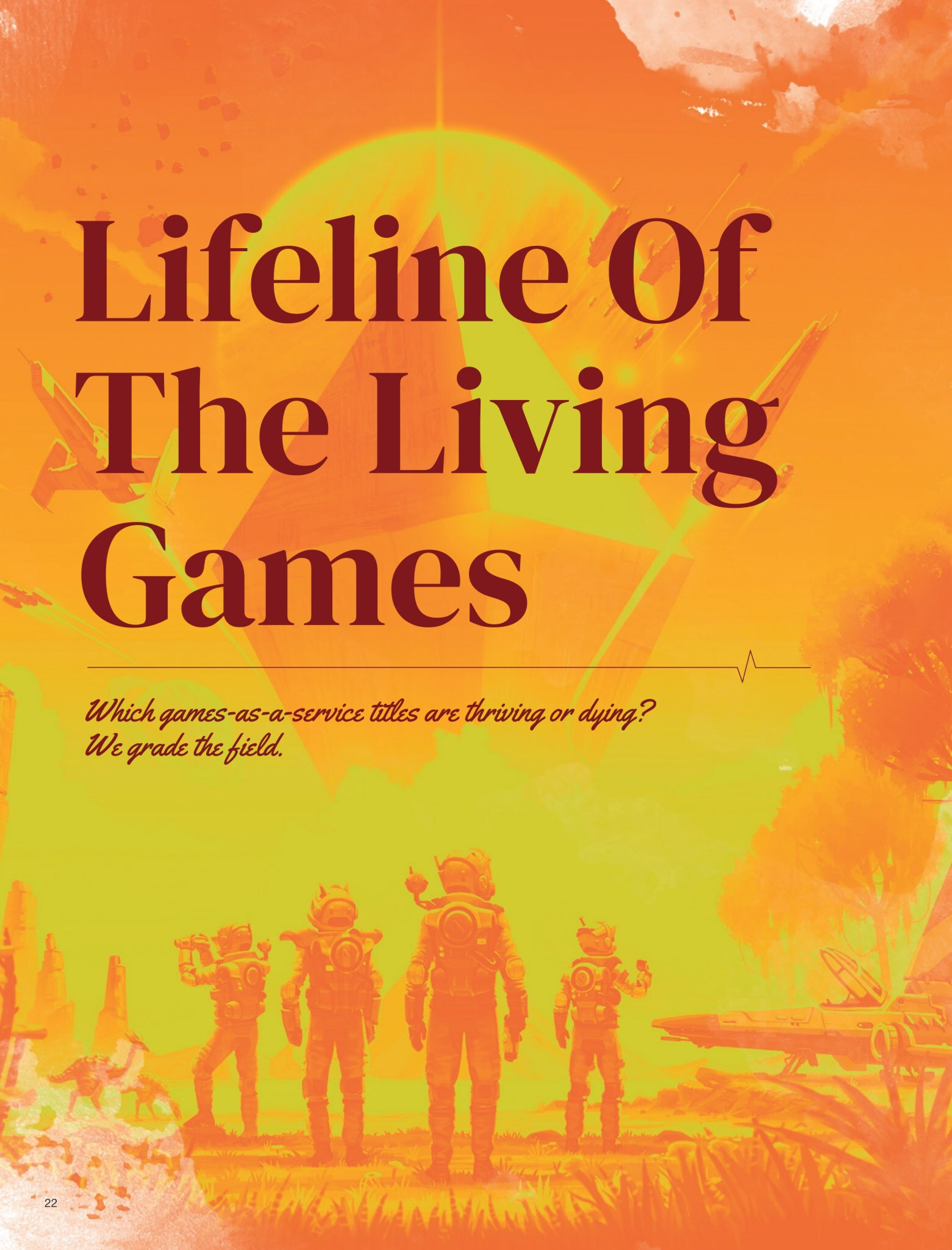


ELECTRONIC ARTS' stock price dropped 3.5 percent ($750 million of the company's market cap) after rival Konami snagged the exclusive team license for legendary Italian soccer team Juventus for Konami's PES 2020 (shown). The upcoming FIFA 20 from EA will still feature real-life Juventus players like Ronaldo (and likenesses), but they'll be playing under the fictional team name Piemonte Calcio. This deal won't affect the large lead the FIFA franchise has over PES, but this kind of warring over licenses makes fans wish all the titles shared all the licenses.

Quotable

"... I can see EA, Microsoft, or Bethesda try to placate players by just talking to them, but for right or wrong, it just doesn't really work."

Sean Murray, co-founder Hello Games. Murray says when games like No Man's Sky have problematic launches, sometimes it's better to show and not just tell.



Lifeline Of The Living Games

Which games-as-a-service titles are thriving or dying? We grade the field.

People have been playing World of Warcraft for 15 years. The world of Azeroth is a second home for these players, a place where lifelong friendships are made, communities flourish, and new adventures arrive like clockwork. The player base remains strong today, and developer Blizzard Entertainment continues to deliver content that entertains both veterans and newcomers alike. World of Warcraft remains one of the most successful games in any given year, and has become a blueprint for other developers to follow – and not just for MMOs.

Few games will ever achieve a lifeline nearly as long as this, but keeping a player entertained for years beyond the initial game release is a proven path to success for studios. They want you to buy or download their games, but also hope you keep playing them for as long as possible. Grand Theft Auto V is one of the best-selling games of all time with nearly 110 million copies sold, and its online component is another success story, bringing in more than $1 billion in revenue.

The games-as-a-service model keeps players coming back for more when implemented properly. Fortnite uses a timely season format to alert players of new events, whereas Grand Theft Auto Online functions like a leaky faucet with drips of new content arriving frequently. These are two wildly different approaches, but both have been hugely successful.

The communities embedded in these living games have a voice that helps direct what content comes next, how much it costs, and whether or not the developer is truly catering to their needs. Not all content is received warmly, and player bases can fall off quickly if a developer falters in its efforts. Diablo III was met with a cold reception, and forced Blizzard to make sweeping changes to appease players. H1Z1, Realm Royale, and Wildstar started hot, but ended up falling through unwanted post-release content.

When a living game makes a mark, developers need to move fast to keep players entertained. Apex Legends roared out of the gates and players wanted more, but Respawn wasn't in a position to meet the demand, and the player base shrunk significantly. Anthem promised plenty of content, yet has delivered hardly any of it, as developer BioWare shifted its focus to address player issues first.

Many of us at *Game Informer* play living games every day and are a part of their communities. Over the next 12 pages, we provide hands-on report cards for some of the biggest games in this space, giving you a good idea of their current pulse and

What Do The Grades Mean?

The grade attached to each title covered in this feature isn't an overall review of the game, and instead speaks to the ongoing support each title has received post-launch. We factor in the all of the DLC, updates, and tweaks developers have added to the experience, along with the current state of support. If a game had years of solid post-launch content, but is now in its twilight and isn't receiving as many updates or developer support, it will score lower than one with a series of recent meaningful content drops.

No Man's Sky

Initial Release: August 9, 2016

For those who dreamed of exploring a massive galaxy filled with intriguing tales and charting their own worlds, No Man's Sky seemed like a dream come true – until it came out. The disappointment that met the initial release was deafening, with a wave of memes poking fun at the discrepancies between the E3 trailer and final version, as well as a steady stream of negative users reviews everywhere. The reason behind the outcry wasn't hard to see. For all its procedurally generated expanse, No Man's Sky had precious little to offer in terms of engaging content or storytelling: just a lot of mining and floating around a great big nothing.

In the years since, developer Hello Games has turned this disappointment into a testament of how powerful the games-as-a-service model can be. Massive (and free) updates like Beyond have added everything from the power to build your own encampments to running your own cargo freighter. Even legitimate multiplayer finally made its way to the game, letting players explore or duke it out among the stars. The flow of content isn't done yet, either, with a VR mode set to arrive before the end of summer. It might have taken some time, but Hello Games' commitment has resulted in a game that not only lives up to but also goes beyond its original, ambitious promise. What started out as a poor (yet pretty) sci-fi imitation of Minecraft has evolved in spectacular fashion to become one of the greatest comeback stories in modern gaming. *– Javy Gwaltney*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A

Overwatch

Initial Release: May 24, 2016

Since its launch in 2016, Overwatch has consistently given players reasons to move the payload. The introduction of 10 new heroes has kept players on their toes learning new strategies. Whether it's watching adorable hamster Hammond crash into enemies and earn his "wrecking ball" moniker, or having the latest hero, Baptiste, throw down his immortality field to block a game-changing ultimate, every new hero has brought something exciting to the table.

Nine new maps have also kept the game fresh, from the Blizzard World amusement park to the Australian scrapyard of Junkertown. This doesn't even factor in seasonal events, special modes such as Deathmatch, and the Workshop that lets you get creative with customized games. We just wish the hero reworks and quality of new skins and maps were more even. – *Kimberley Wallace*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B+

Fortnite

Initial Release: September 26, 2017

People flocked to Fortnite's battle-royale mode because it was a hell of a lot of fun, but it became a phenomenon through Epic Games' aggressive post-launch support. The seasonal format and battle pass unite to create an environment where players wanted to play to see what changed, and also to unlock new loot. People also log in hoping to see an event that teases what comes next. Whether it's a dimensional rift appearing in the sky or an ominous purple cube appearing over a lake, Fortnite's mysteries bring people in and make them talk. Epic has also been quick to implement fixes or changes if the community doesn't like an addition. One of the biggest games of this generation is getting the biggest support we've ever seen, and the results have been staggering. – *Andrew Reiner*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A+

Red Dead Online

Initial Release: November 27, 2018

It took Rockstar a while to get Grand Theft Auto Online into proper working form, but the developer eventually found the same level of success it typically delivers with its phenomenal campaigns. Red Dead Online's technology started in a much better place, but we still haven't seen Rockstar reveal the mode's full potential just yet.

Spending the first several months in beta, Rockstar's efforts primarily went to shoring up the infrastructure by eliminating bugs, trying to address rampant griefing, and reworking the economy. The performance has improved, but even though Rockstar removed the beta tag, Red Dead Online is still prone to server disconnects and failed matchmaking.

Technical hiccups aside, Red Dead Online is getting better with each passing month. Recently, Rockstar introduced new cooperative story missions, daily challenges, dynamic free-roam encounters, more stranger missions starring fan-favorite characters, and poker into the fold. Combine these improvements with the steady drip of new adversarial modes, cosmetics, free items, and bonus RP events, and we still find reasons to return to the frontier every week.

However, the best is clearly yet to come. Later this summer Red Dead Online will introduce the bounty hunter, trader, and collector roles, each with its own progression and unique weapons, outfits, and gadgets to earn. These roles are the first step in Rockstar's wider ambition of letting people live out their own Wild West fantasies in a shared online open world. We're excited to see where it goes from there. – *Matt Bertz*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

C+

Rainbow Six Siege

Initial Release: December 1, 2015

The story of Rainbow Six Siege's rise is well known. Launching to middling sales and reviews due to lacking infrastructure and technical issues, the game attained huge success in the following years thanks to Ubisoft's unceasing support via technical updates and content drops.

Each three-month season of Siege offers two new operators and a new or reworked map, which is a steady enough pace to keep Siege's excellent match-to-match gameplay fresh. Map knowledge is crucial to Siege, and the recent shift to focusing on reworks over completely new maps is making for a stronger pool that's more fun to learn, with less filler padding out the roster. Time-limited events like a reimagining of the Plane map as a toy plane in a child's bedroom, or a Wild West shootout limited to double-barrel slug shotguns and revolvers, are good for a few matches while they're around but aren't too sorely missed once they're gone. These free events come once per season, supported by cosmetic items won in pricey random packs with no chance of duplicates.

Despite good communication from developers, important balance changes and bug fixes can still take months. As solid as the content updates have been, a sequel with a stronger foundation for quicker patches and easier mechanic changes could make Siege an unconditional recommendation. Unfortunately, thanks to a player base of more than 45 million, that's a move Ubisoft won't be making anytime soon. *– Leo Vader*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE
B+

Star Wars: Battlefront II

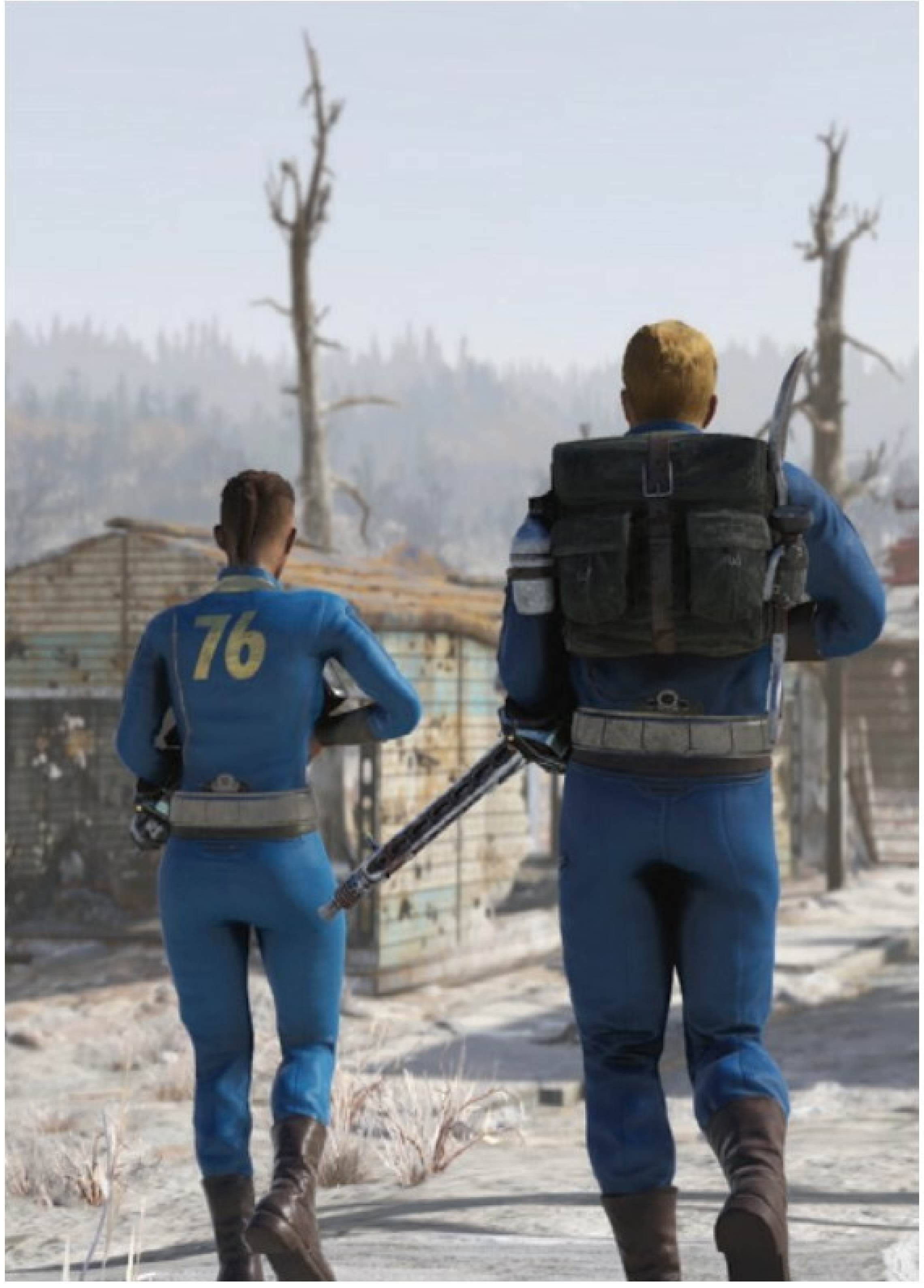
Initial Release: November 17, 2017

The Battlefront II launch was a disaster. EA pulled back from its initial pay-to-win loot box mechanic after its poor reception during the beta, and removed microtransactions entirely at launch (they were later brought back only for cosmetics). However, the damage was already done. Almost two years later, the game is still trying to recover.

Since that troubled beginning, EA has added a modest amount of content to Battlefront II, from characters like Anakin Skywalker and Count Dooku to modes such as the multi-stage objectives of Capital Supremacy. Regardless, the bare and boring progression structure stresses the fact that Battlefront II simply wasn't meant to exist in its current form – as odious as the original design was.

EA needs to keep building the game out with content and features if it is to retain its community, which has been relatively patient under the circumstances. More weapons, new hero costumes and class appearances (as well as obvious heroes like Ahsoka Tano), additional modes and/or maps (including once again merging ground-based and starfighter combat like in the last Battlefront), and expanded squad interplay are just the tip of the iceberg of what Battlefront II needs. EA plans to announce non-PvP gameplay this month, and surely *The Rise of Skywalker* content is also in the works when the film comes out in December, but EA still has a lot of work to do if it wants this game to reach its potential. *– Matthew Kato*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE
C



Fallout 76

Initial Release: November 14, 2018

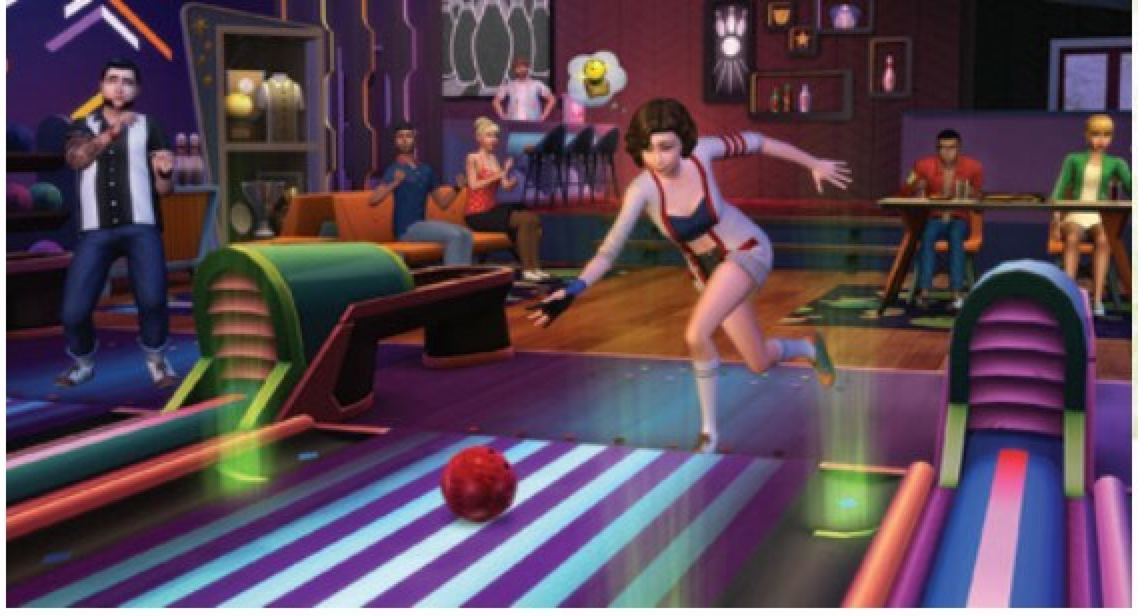
After a horrific, glitch-filled launch, Fallout 76 is getting better. Bethesda is committed to improving the player's time in the wasteland, whether it's through much needed fixes or a steady drip of new content. The updates, which hit frequently, often address a multitude of things. The latest patch made the game a little easier for new players, reduced the time it takes for food to perish, and improved weapon descriptions. Though these updates can often temporarily create more issues and bugs, they are ultimately moving Fallout 76 in the right direction. Along with these quality-of-life tweaks, Bethesda has periodically released free themed updates that give players plenty more to do.

The Wild Appalachia update added a new questline, the standalone Survival mode, player vending, C.A.M.P. decorating, and a host of improvements. The next addition to the game was something players weren't expecting: a standalone 52-player battle-royale mode called Nuclear Winter. While Fallout 76's gunplay doesn't offer the highest level of precision, this mode is fun and has been supported in a big way by the community.

Bethesda has listened closely to fans and has moved quickly in addressing issues they may be having, such as expanding the size of the stash box. The developer has also done a nice job of informing the player base of what is coming next. The consensus is the world feels empty without NPCs to interact with, so so they're being added this fall along with an entirely new story. This is a huge change that completely upends Bethesda's stance that the only humans in the game would be other players. That's a high level of commitment to getting it right. While no game should ever launch with as many technical issues as Fallout 76 did, it's heading in the right direction. – *Andrew Reiner*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B-



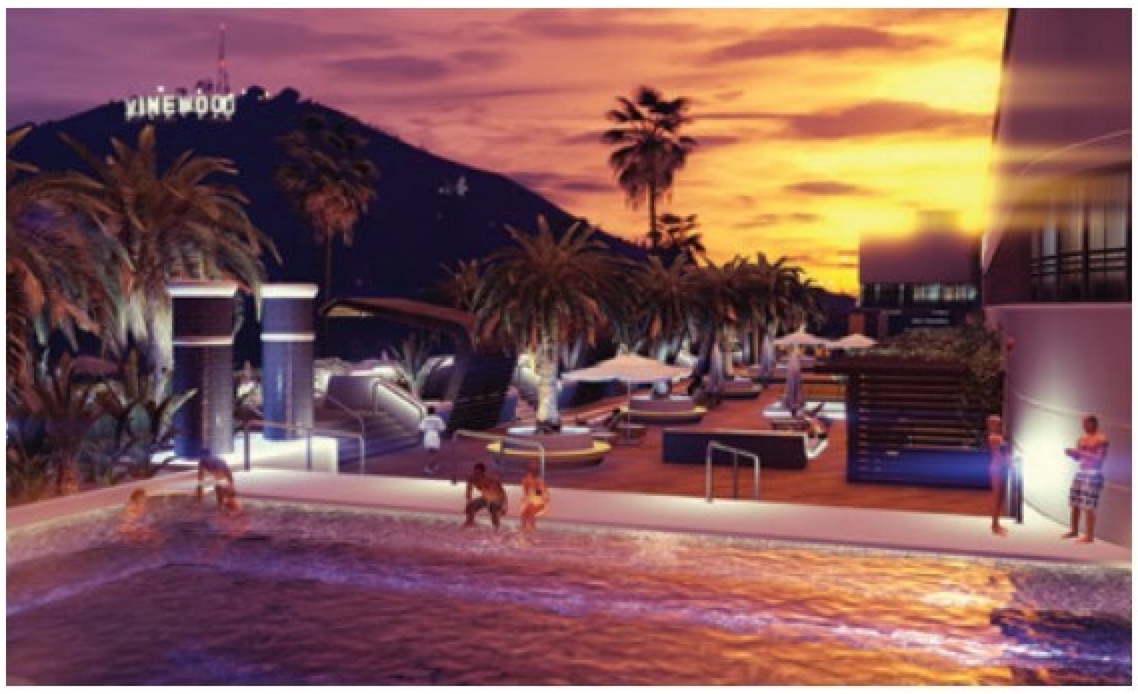
The Sims 4

Initial Release: September 2, 2014

The Sims 4 had a lukewarm initial reception, but this doesn't mean the series has died. The base game was missing core elements like toddlers and swimming pools, but EA listened to disgruntled fans and brought those features back. The developer hasn't just been righting wrongs, though. Its expansion packs have livened up the series as well. Several are repackaged ideas from the past (Get Famous, Get to Work), but seeing features reimagined makes them feel fresh, like being able to open your own veterinary clinic in Cats & Dogs. With seven expansion packs, seven game packs, and 14 stuff packs, we've seen a plethora of new content through its five-year existence, and we're excited to see what comes next. – *Elise Favis*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B



Grand Theft Auto Online

Initial Release: October 1, 2013

Rockstar continues to deliver a steady stream of content to the game *MarketWatch* calls the most successful entertainment title ever, regardless of medium. The Arena War update last December gave players a Twisted Metal-style bloodsport. More recently, GTA Online received the Diamond Casino update, which delivered a new selection of missions along with the highly anticipated destination resort that allows players to play games of chance, party in the penthouse, or put on car shows in the giant garage. As long as players continue to invest hundreds of thousands of hours into the game, we expect Rockstar to continue the steady rollout new content well into the future. – *Matt Bertz*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A-

Apex Legends

Initial Release: February 4, 2019

Respawn's take on battle royale launched strong thanks to a brilliant fusion of frantic gunplay and hero-driven abilities, setting it apart from the other heavy-hitters in the genre. While Apex's foundational gameplay remains as strong as ever, the updates Respawn has released in the half year since the game came out have done little to propel Apex Legends in a bold direction.

Both the first two seasons of content added intriguing characters, like adrenaline-powered Octane and the devious defense hero Wattson. Respawn also made much-needed tweaks like adding a ranked mode and buffing the Mozambique so it's more than a big paperweight, but the other additions aren't nearly as compelling. The battle pass system feels like a carbon copy of Fortnite and Black Ops 4's systems, but with worse rewards. The map changes introduced in Season Two have done little to alleviate the fact that Kings Canyon, while tactically engaging, is a dire bore when it comes to offering an interesting setting. Sure, there are a couple of new arenas like Containment and The Cage, but the whole area is still a weak combination of grassy plains, deserted wastes, and military complexes.

To be fair to Respawn, Apex Legends has been out less than a year, and these updates do feel foundational for what we hope are better things to come, like limited-time events or ancillary modes. Yet, it's hard to shake the feeling that Apex is doing little more than playing catch-up right now. *– Javy Gwaltney*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

C

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

Initial Release: October 5, 2018

Assassin's Creed Odyssey is a single-player experience with a clear ending, but Ubisoft has taken a games-as-a-service approach to supporting it. Additional quests, New Game Plus, and quality-of-life changes (like raised level caps and cosmetic customization) have helped players stay immersed.

A newly introduced story creator lets the community design, share, and play their own quests. Plus, an educational Discovery Tour mode (like the one in Origins) is on the way this fall. All of this comes free with the base game, but players who purchased the season pass get even more, with access to two episodic DLC arcs that are especially important to the series' wider lore. *– Joe Juba*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B+

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

Initial Release: December 20, 2017

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds was the catalyst that ushered in a wave of trend-chasing battle royale titles. Over the years, this free-to-play title has received new modes, maps, weapons, vehicles, and systems that make it a joy to revisit.

Though PUBG Corporation was slow to provide updates early on, recent content drops have made significant cosmetic and functional additions. Whether you're hiding out in the tropical Sanhok or the frozen Vikendi, you're always earning progress toward fun ways to show off your character. In the near future, players can look forward to a revamp of the original Erangel map, complete with hidden cellars to blow your way into. *– Daniel Tack*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B-

The Division 2

Initial Release: March 15, 2019

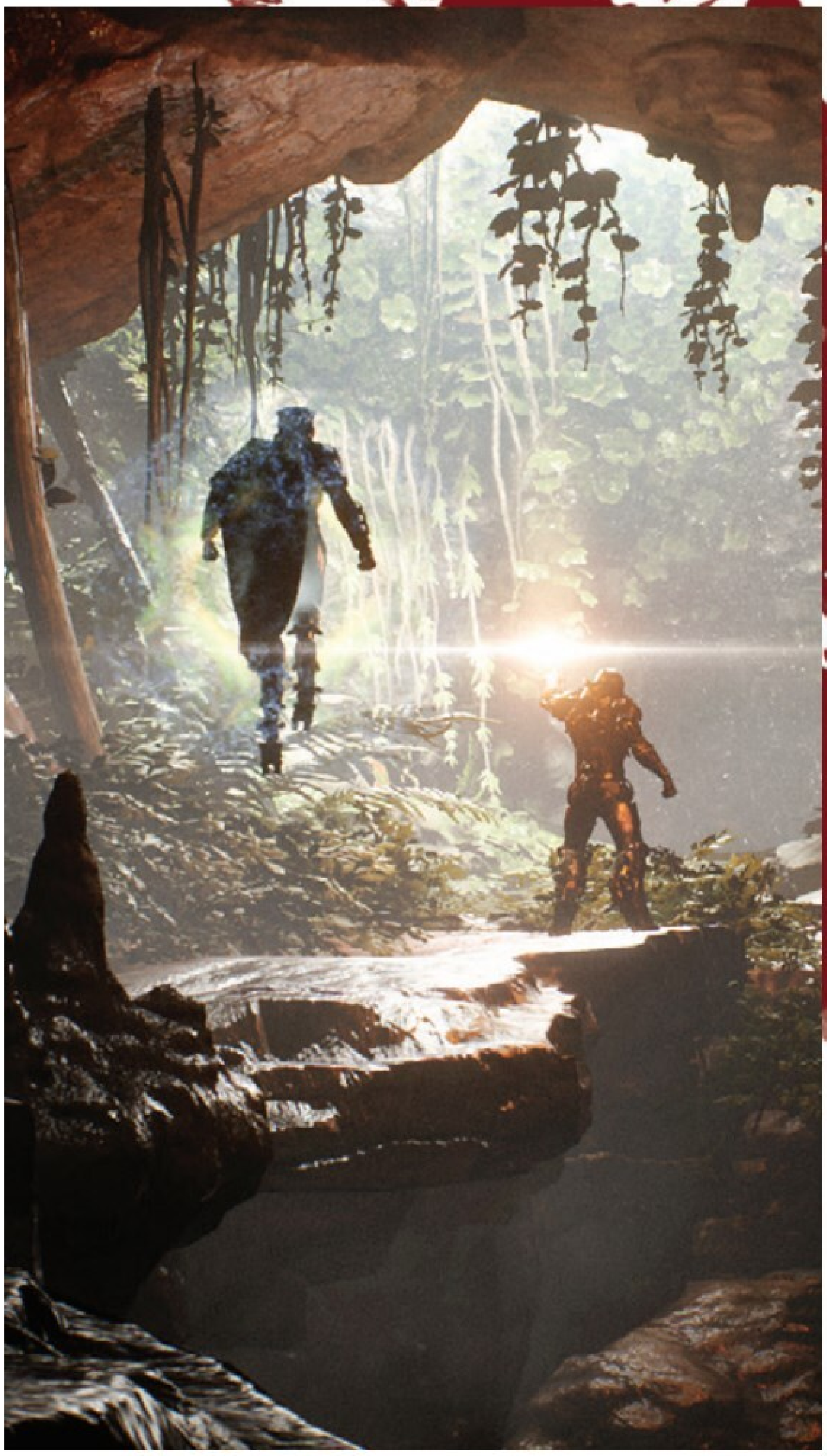
Launching an online live-service game that has enough content to keep hardcore players coming back every day isn't easy. Developers often need several years before a game has all the systems and loot loops in place to keep its most dedicated fans satiated. The Division 2 came damn close, with a robust collection of post-campaign objectives. Whether farming for gear-loadout optimizations, collecting item blueprints, cracking the cyphers to fight the elite hunters, hunting for exotic weapons parts, or jumping into the competitive Dark Zone and Conflict spaces, The Division 2 offers hundreds of hours of content out of the gate. But even with all these avenues of play, the most enthusiastic players burned through it all and are waiting for several shortcomings to be addressed.

Once you blast through the content, The Division 2's daily grind lacks compelling incentives. Getting a valuable new item feels increasingly rare the more you play, and the lack of empowering crafting and recalibration options means most of your time in the menus is spent in waste management, not item improvement. Other hot-button issues Massive needs to address includes increasing build diversity, fortifying the Dark Zones with activities to make these dangerous spaces more alluring, and bringing back some variant of the fan-favorite Survival mode from the first game.

Much more content for The Division 2 is on the way in 2019 and beyond – including a content pack centered around the Pentagon and a return to New York City. We're excited to check out these expansions, and if Massive continues to address the most immediate problem areas this could be a game we play into 2020 and beyond. *– Matt Bertz*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B+



Anthem

Initial Release: February 22, 2019

Rather than delivering new content for players to dive into, BioWare has spent most of its time trying to fix Anthem. The focus since the game's launch in February has mostly been on balancing, stabilizing, and delivering quality-of-life alterations. As helpful as it is to be able to fast travel to specific locations and access the inventory on the fly, these late improvements should have been there at release, and do nothing to feed a frustrated player base hungry for new content.

Outside of what amount to little tweaks, the cadence of new content has been abysmal. BioWare fed the community scraps in the form of legendary missions and one new stronghold. There still isn't a legitimate endgame for people who have been there since day one.

An eight-week event called Cataclysm is BioWare's latest effort to get people to come back, but its release keeps getting pushed back. We'll have to wait to see if Cataclysm makes a difference. On the day Anthem launched, BioWare excitedly told fans, "this is the start of a rich live service we'll be creating together." As of now, that relationship has mostly been fans complaining and BioWare trying to address their concerns. This game may be beyond saving at this point. The player base is drying up, and BioWare hasn't shown us it can deliver content at a reasonable pace to truly be considered a living service. *– Andrew Reiner*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

F

Path of Exile

Initial Release: October 23, 2013

Path of Exile is a free-to-play dungeon-crawler that not only lives up to its genre inspirations but in many instances surpasses titans like Diablo. How? By giving players what they want. Constant updates include seasonal leagues that add temporary and often unique diversions, such as new enemies and even a Pokémon-like animal-collection element. Best of all, it's possible to play the entirety of the game on console or PC without spending a single dime. There are a few quality-of-life additions you can spring for, which make inventory management easier in the mid- to late-game. Aside from those few instances, the rest of the offerings are purely cosmetic and offer absolutely no in-game benefits. As it turns out, people like playing dress-up, especially when it feeds into such a thriving community. – *Jeff Cork*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A

Battlefield V

Initial Release: November 9, 2018

Given how many advertised features were still missing when Battlefield V launched, our review said the game would sink or swim based on its post-release performance. Nine months later, we can confidently say Battlefield V is the worst mainline entry of the series. DICE has been slow to add maps, and the late content it did deliver (like the Firestorm battle royale and cooperative Combined Arms) frankly isn't good. Worst of all, for every forward step the gameplay takes with a new patch, it takes two steps backward in the form of bugs like invisible soldiers, faulty hit registration, and audio glitches. Why DICE *still* doesn't have a playtest environment for this game is beyond me. BFV has new maps and the Pacific Theater coming soon, but it may be too little too late given the game's standing in the community. – *Matt Bertz*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

D

Still Trending

In developing this feature, we spent significant amounts of time in as many games as we could, but didn't have the time to play everything that's worth being mentioned. Below are other games-as-a-service titles that we didn't spend enough time to grade.

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

Two decades after the original Half-Life mod launched, Counter-Strike has successfully transitioned from mod to full-priced game to free-to-play giant. It may be showing its age graphically, but Valve's tactical shooter continues to be a preferred game thanks to smart balance tweaks, new quality-of-life features, and a slew of new and redesigned maps.

Elder Scrolls Online

Elder Scrolls Online got off to a rough start, but in the years that followed, it transformed into one of the most successful and played MMOs to date. ZeniMax Online Studios continues to service its huge player base with massive updates. Simply put, it's thriving.

Eve Online

Eve Online has created one of the most vast shared worlds in gaming. While the players themselves are the flashpoint for much of the drama and action, both within the game and the real world outside it, CCP shakes things up regularly with changes, updates, and upgrades, including a surprise alien invasion this year that has players scrambling to survive.

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

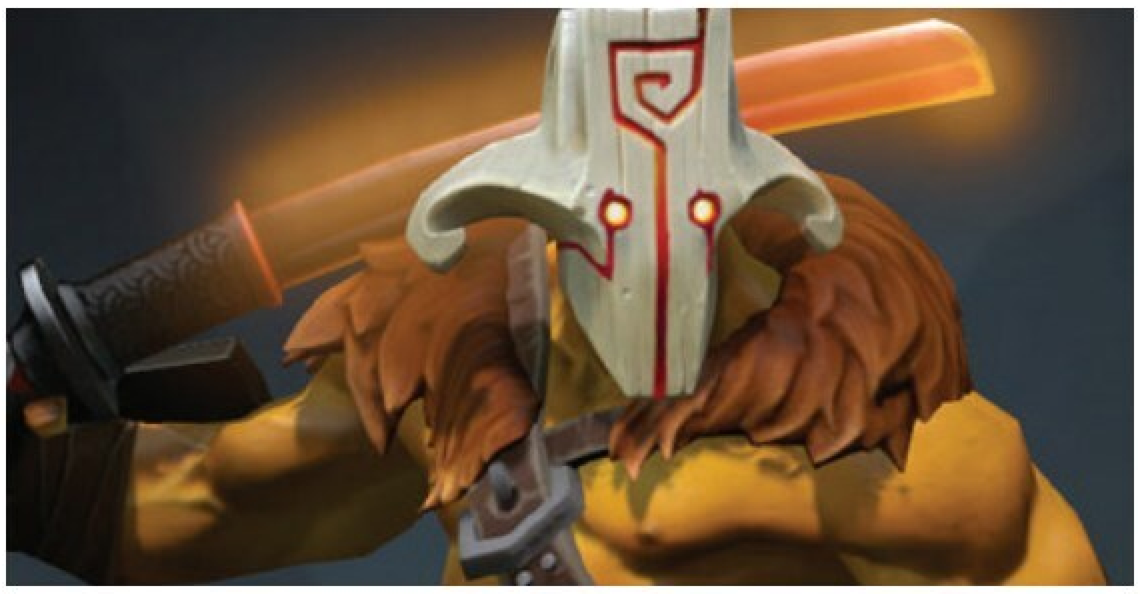
After failing to the point of having to be rebooted, Final Fantasy XIV has recovered nicely, maintaining a consistent (yet relatively small) player base that Square rewards periodically with huge, story-based expansions like this summer's Shadowbringers.

For Honor

For Honor has grown its community along with its roster since 2017, turning a rocky start into another staple multiplayer game for Ubisoft. Ten post-launch characters, new single-player modes, and training modes have kept casual players coming back, while a slew of weekly quests and balance patches have kept dedicated players busy during and between multiplayer beatdowns.

Hearthstone

With expansions that hit at a regular pace delivering fresh decks and new mechanics, Hearthstone stays strong, continually reinventing itself. More importantly, delving into incredibly satisfying single-player dungeon-crawling content has given players a new way to engage with the game – even if they don't want to climb the ladder.



Dota 2

Initial Release: July 9, 2013

Valve has come up with clever ways for players to pour gobs of cash into Dota 2. The in-match info you get by being a Dota Plus subscriber (like a breakdown of which damage types are wrecking you) enters into dangerous territory, but the service also rewards dedicated play with fun cosmetics. The annual battle pass this year includes cosmetic overhauls for three characters, a couple of new game modes, and more. But to Valve's credit, it's kept its promise of letting you play as any of its 117 heroes for free. Mod support has allowed for some grand experiments (not the least of which is the Auto Chess craze that brought new players to the client in droves). Balance patches have been more frequent and unafraid to take key heroes, and the game overall, in exciting new directions to keep things fresh nearly a decade in. – *Suriel Vazquez*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B-

Hitman 2

Initial Release: November 13, 2018

The fact that Hitman is a living game at all is a point of controversy. IO's always-online requirement and a season pass with levels that continue the game's story are valid complaints from players longing for a more simple, straightforward package. But judging it for what it is, the consistent flow of content, bug fixes, and clear roadmaps make the game a modern stealth fan's dream.

Hitman's massive, intricate levels are reinvigorated multiple times per week with new missions, rewards, and challenging time-limited elusive targets, while monthly patches update and tune mechanics to player feedback. What could've been an enjoyable 30-hour experience has been given long-term support that's worthwhile and rewarding, supported by fairly priced DLC with no random elements. –*Leo Vader*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A-

League of Legends

Riot's monolithic MOBA still offers a steady content drip of new and interesting champions, which keeps League of Legends' tried-and-true gameplay experience fresh. Longtime players continue to stick around thanks to limited-time events and modes, including the recent Teamfight Tactics, which lets players take their favorite champions into a turn-based strategy experience.

Minecraft

You'd think Minecraft would be in its twilight by now, but Mojang just added its biggest update yet, called Village and Pillage. Minecraft is also frequently updated with licensed content, such as *Toy Story 4* skins and world building.

Mortal Kombat 11

Three months after launch, the Towers of Time grind is beginning to wear on dedicated Mortal Kombat 11 players (some outfits in the game still haven't shown up in the time-gated mode). However, the arrival of a seasonal ranked mode and new DLC characters, as well as the newfound depth of combat, have kept players slugging it out for now.

Rocket League

Four years after Rocket League nitro-blasted into the gaming scene, the surprise esports hit still has a healthy player base and steady streaming audience. This is thanks to a strong service platform that continually adds new challenges, events, limited time modes, and quality of life upgrades like cross-platform support. Epic Games recently acquired Psynoix, which should bolster the Rocket League studio even further.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

While we'd like to see more added in terms of challenges, getting new characters and stages periodically has extended the life of the latest Smash Bros. Banjo-Kazooie is something fans were screaming for and this loveable duo is coming soon.

Warframe

Just looking at the massive list of content being added to Warframe is a bit overwhelming, but shows that its already long lifeline won't end any time soon. The updates touch on everything from quests to graphics and even a new CG intro, giving the 50 million players more reasons to stick around.

Sea of Thieves

Initial Release: March 20, 2018

Sea of Thieves launched with an interesting playground that allowed players to team up and sail on a ship together, but the experience was light on content. Repetitive missions offered little in terms of exciting rewards, but in the months following release, developer Rare issued frequent free updates that empowered players with new tools, like rowboats and the Speaking Trumpet that made it easier to communicate with faraway players. Rare also implemented new challenges, like enemy ships crewed by skeletons.

These updates were welcome, but did little to address players' core issue with Sea of Thieves – a lack of meaningful, world-building content. The One-Year Anniversary Update was Sea of Thieves' biggest and most worthwhile contribution. Along with adding more tools like fishing rods and harpoon guns, it also added much-needed story content and the Arena mode.

The story missions encourage teamwork with difficult puzzle-solving missions that send you across the map. Arena mode gives Sea of Thieves players the chance to experience the best of Sea of Thieves (teamwork and treasure hunting) in a much more manageable window of time.

Despite the frequent, substantial, and free updates, Sea of Thieves still struggles with meaningful progression without RPG elements (a deliberate choice from Rare for the sake of balance). The future could be brighter, though, as Rare is committed to the game and the year of updates it has received already have undoubtedly improved the game. – *Kyle Hilliard*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

C

Destiny 2

Initial Release: September 6, 2017

After a dicey first year of support post-launch in which small-scale expansions failed to connect with fans, Destiny 2 had a strong release in the fall of 2018 with Forsaken. Revised systems and classes, a more mature and nuanced storytelling tone, and a recommitment to core players brought many back into the fold, and propelled the game forward on a wave of positive sentiment.

The split from Activision in early 2019 means big changes (including a forthcoming move to Steam on PC), but the full reverberations of the separation remain to be seen in the long-term health and funding of the series. Nonetheless, even before the break-up with its publisher, Bungie has been moving to more open communication with its fans, and the approach of a regularly updated roadmap and detailing of planned changes has been mostly welcomed by the vocal community.

In-game, Destiny 2 has been at a strong stride for several months, with regular (often weekly) new loot, game modes, and seasonal updates, including excellent raids, exotic quests, and new lore developments. New game types like the Black Armory Forges and the recent Menagerie have all provided new endgame content primarily targeted to seasoned PvE players. PvP has seen less innovation; a balanced mix of weapons and classes is welcome, but there's little recent meat on the bone.

Moving toward 2020, Destiny 2 needs to better invite new players into the fireteam (perhaps through the announced free-to-play option coming this fall), and return the core adventure to its central beats and characters, rather than diversions and gear acquisition absent purpose to a broader goal or activity. – *Matt Miller*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

B

World of Warcraft

Initial Release: November 23, 2004

Fifteen years later, the game that defined the subscription model for continued content is still going strong. While the path hasn't always been perfect, with some expansions having huge lulls in content offerings and design decisions being hit-or-miss with class homogenization, the rise of the daily quest, and bite-sized engagement slices taking the stage over social-heavy raid structure, WoW has consistently been the one to beat not only as a MMORPG but as the concept of an ever-evolving service game.

New expansions provide a wealth of new classes, races, dungeons, raids, and more to explore every few years, but giant patches between each keep players coming back to dive into new experiences with their guilds on a regular basis. From the early days meandering around in Westfall waiting your turn to interact with quest NPCs to the newer age of dungeon finder and world quests, additions and upgrades to the game are far too many to document. Whether you're a solo player with a ton of different characters hunting down rare mounts and exotic reputations or a nightly raider looking to tackle the next big boss, WoW caters to the occasional login and the hardcore alike. If beating down legions of monsters isn't your thing, there are numerous battlegrounds and player-vs-player experiences available as well in both casual and competitive forms.

While the face of WoW today is far removed from its original incarnation, players looking for that experience can delight in the release of Classic WoW this year, allowing the same WoW subscription to be used for a trek back in time to play the game as it once was, back in the beginning. – *Daniel Tack*

GAMES-AS-A-SERVICE GRADE

A+

photo: Carol Lynn Schoaff

Finding The 'Art' In Electronic Arts

Chief studios officer Laura Miele leads Electronic Arts' internal worldwide studio group, which is comprised of 19 studios and 5,500 game developers. We spoke to her about Star Wars, streaming, the Switch, and how the company plans to evolve in the near future.

You've been in your current role for about a year. What were your goals for your first several months on the job, and what were you able to accomplish so far?
My first hundred days, I visited every studio, spent as much time with as many people as I could, and listened. I wanted to make sure I didn't show up in this role as if I knew everything that was going on and I knew what the situation was given that I've been at EA for such a long time. So I had to really discipline myself to show up with fresh ears and eyes. I had a couple of rules. No one was allowed to present a PowerPoint to me, and we spent probably maybe less than half the time on the games. I wanted to talk to people and understand how our process was, what was going well, and how they felt about their market, our players, and their games. It was a very powerful, insightful time for me.

Then I set our vision and strategy from there – to create an optimal environment for game creators. In turn, they will create great games for our players and innovate and disrupt this business.

interview by Matt Bertz

What needs to be in place to allow that vision to succeed and transform EA?
First and foremost, we have to be the best place for the best people. That is anywhere from having the best tech and tools for our teams, to our teams around the world having access to some of the great creative leadership we have in the company. Those 5,500 people we have – that is decades and hundreds of years of experience collectively. We have incredible leaders as well who are deep experts in their craft. How do we help expose as many people to these experts, these craft leaders throughout our organization as possible? I want our size or resources to be a massive benefit to be at EA and not have it be a detriment or a tax. This is a company that spends billions of dollars making games. We have incredible advanced technologies. We have doctorates in biomechanics for motion capture, we have significant technical art leadership that comes from film and advanced tech backgrounds. I want teams to be able to tap into that.

Let's talk about one of the pillars of your technology: the Frostbite engine. Many studios have had troubles migrating to the platform, and at the same time, we've seen the most recent EA success story – Apex Legends – go another direction with its tech. Is there still an edict where internal EA studios must migrate to Frostbite, or are you now allowing them to explore other platforms?
There are strengths and weaknesses and gives and takes for all technology solutions. That said, the culture we're establishing and creating in the studio organization is not a prescriptive culture. For those game teams that are not on Frostbite, the Frostbite team is working with them to earn the business, but it is not a mandate. That said, I believe Frostbite is the right foundation to take us into the future. We know this and we've deeply researched it. So I have a lot of confidence in the engine itself and where it will help take us. As we sit today, it is not the easiest engine to interact with, and that is not the place I want us to be. Over the last six months and the year ahead, we've actually doubled resources to develop new tools, develop new interfaces, develop new workflows for developers to tap into the power of this engine. We are aggressively working on overcoming some of these gaps and challenges, and we've made pretty significant progress.

A lot of EA games have moved to a live service model. One thing I see with EA's games that I don't see as much with other publishers is the real disconnect in the cadences between those groups in terms of how often they're interfacing with the community and pushing out updates. Are you investing in creating a best practices group that can help those teams get on their feet a little earlier in the post-launch process and nail that cadence you need to keep a community engaged? How can EA get better?
Culturally, listening to our players is job one, and that is a critical pillar. How that manifests itself and how we show up to our players, we absolutely need to evolve, and we will continue to invest there and improve in that area … I think we have some successes, wins, and some strengths. And I think we have areas that we will continue to evolve. But as with many things it's a complex puzzle that we're incredibly motivated to continue to build on.

The Nintendo Switch has a strong install base, and a lot of publishers are having success on the platform whereas maybe with the past few Nintendo consoles they didn't. Are you reconsidering your investment with that platform?
Yes. We invested in FIFA. We had good success there. I love that we have such a great global reach and global presence on that platform with that game. We are absolutely looking at more Switch games in our portfolio, so more to come on that. We're not going to announce anything as of yet. But it is absolutely a platform we're looking at for some of our more successful games.

You took control of the Star Wars partnership in 2013. EA ran into some turbulence with the canceled Project Ragtag. Several years later, EA has only delivered a few Star Wars games – two Battlefronts, Galaxy of Heroes has been a successful mobile game, and Jedi: Fallen Order is coming soon. How is that relationship with Lucasfilm? Do you think the frequency of games lives up to the expectations they had when they signed the deal?
You'd have to ask Lucasfilm, but I believe the partnership has been successful. We commercially have done well. I'm proud of the games we've created in the Star Wars world. I know there was controversy around one of them, but I think that was really blown out of proportion. Galaxy of Heroes may go down in history as the most successful Star Wars game ever created based on all the revenue that is generated every year. The Battlefront experiences are rich; I think they fulfill the fantasy of being in the Star Wars world with all the well-known characters. Our player satisfaction scores in both of those games continue to go up year over year. We continue to provide content for the community, we've not backed away from it and I think Lucasfilm is pleased about that. And there's more to be had. It's a long relationship, so we're not done. I'm excited about other ideas and things that we have in the works that will potentially come to market, and I love the creative relationship and partnership.

When Project Ragtag moved from Visceral to Vancouver, the public messaging was "our players told us they don't want a linear, story-driven experience, they want something that's a little more open." Then when we see the reveal of Jedi: Fallen Order, it's very much a linear, story-based experience. What's the disconnect there?
That's a fair question. I don't really have the history on what our public messaging was. I believe in immersed worlds and immersed experiences, and I believe in single-player experiences in games. I do. I play them, I love them, and I want EA to have a really diverse offering of content. As you would imagine, the actual details of how games are developed, how games are actually tracking, and what's actually working, what's not working is more often than not far more complicated than what is publicly said. I'll just leave it at that. But as we go forward, we will absolutely have a diverse range of genres and content. I believe in the future of subscriptions and services, we're actually going to be liberated to go beyond the constraints of a $60 packaged good. I'm actually pretty excited about that. I think that we can have small indie games, we can have story games, we can add episodic content to the story games that we put out, we'll have big launches of live services. I feel like we're going to be able to mix it up far more than we had in the past.

Over the past decade, EA has thinned and streamlined its studio pool, whether it be merging EA Montreal with Motive, Maxis moving into EARS, or closing Visceral and Danger Close. Looking at the industry right now, consolidation is happening and bigger publishers are scooping up studios. Are you happy with the current number you have right now? Are you looking to acquire or build new studios, or do you feel EA Originals and EA Partners collaborations are a better approach right now?
We are always looking at acquisition and expanding our content offerings for players, particularly as the marketplace and the landscape and media changes. That said, I think that we have a really strong studio organization, I think our

size is a stable size. Most importantly, we have really great leadership in the studio organization. Acquisitions often help us evolve and expand our talent and leadership as well. So when you think about an acquisition such as Respawn, we have Vince Zampella in the organization now, and he has been not only a major contributor in developing great games for EA, but also in the reach and impact he's had on the rest of the studio organization as well. Then you also look at an acquisition we made in a company called Industrial Toys. That was Alex Seropian, one of the co-founders of Bungie, and he's run large studios at Disney and in other places. He also has been a really strong contributor to help us think about how to expand, whether it be the creative process or production development. So yes, we have EA Partners. We have our EA Originals indie program. And then of course, we're always looking at acquisitions within the marketplace and industry overall.

Let's switch to another hot-button topic: streaming. EA could certainly continue through the traditional publisher approach of putting your games on platforms like Stadia or xCloud, or it could continue to invest in technology itself and leverage its own library. How are you approaching streaming as a wider philosophy?

EA has always been a fairly platform agnostic company, so we are looking at all options and all partnerships. Partners bring unique opportunities for us to think about how we reach new players in the world. We do have our own streaming technology we've been working on internally; we acquired a small company in Israel. Candidly, it's been a great way for us to learn a lot more about the space. We want to bring our content to as many players around the world as we possibly can, so we're thinking about it in a quite expansive way. So my response to you is a very yes/and response – we're looking at partners, and we also have our own technology as well, just so we can be as well informed about the technology, the performance, and how we bring the best experience to the players.

What are the things that need improvement still in the streaming space?

Performance is certainly a big area that we talk a lot about. The biggest gap and the biggest question remains around infrastructure and markets around the world, and then just the pure performance of the game, which is super critical for us. We need to ensure that players will have great experiences and that the games will perform and deliver in a way they would if they're playing on console or PC today. The promise of it is great. We think there's a few years still before we will get to that performance.

EA has a robust back catalogue of games. Do you have an effort underway to capitalize on some of those long-lost games and bring them to a modern platform like Origin?

Yes. As I think about our portfolio strategy for the future, we're definitely looking at the balance of bringing new IP to market as well as tapping into our older fan favorites. To your point, we have many, and I'm pretty passionate about those. I've been at the company for 23 years, so I have an emotional attachment to many of our older brands that I would love to bring back to market. I started at Westwood Studios a long time ago, and our fans were very vocal when we put the mobile [Command & Conquer] game out about a year ago. They're incredibly passionate about the brand. It's why I greenlit the project for us to remaster Command & Conquer. I know it's small, but it's something that our fans cared about deeply. Those types of experiences with our players is exactly what I want us to be and this is exactly how we are thinking about the future. There will be more of those projects to come.

When I look at the Origin lineup and what you offer on PC as opposed to console, you're almost at a point of parity, but there are still a few console-only games like UFC, NHL, and NBA Live. Are you still considering bringing those to the PC space as well?

Yes, they are on the roadmap. PC is a foundational part of gaming, and particularly my background as well. I'm very passionate about PC gaming, and you will see our games on PC in the coming years.

I wrote an editorial last year about EA's missed opportunities, where the company kind of walks away

Laura Miele on BioWare's future: "Where that team is going to point their energy, talent, and resources after [Dragon Age], they have several options. Would it be a new IP? Are we thinking about Anthem? Are we thinking about Mass Effect? And of course we'd certainly look at Knights of the Old Republic."

when it hits a roadblock with a franchise. I cited examples from different eras, like Ultima – one of the original open-world RPGs. EA abandoned it and Elder Scrolls becomes this billion dollar juggernaut in its absence. EA hasn't made a SimCity since the 2013 version and in that vacuum Cities: Skylines comes out and sells six million copies. The most recent stumbles were Dead Space and Mass Effect. Looking at those missed opportunities, is this something where you feel like you need to be more proactive moving forward so other companies don't just ape your brands in their absence and reap the rewards?
Yeah. Those are some of my favorites as well. We can't make announcements today, but please know that we're pretty in touch with where the passion lies with our players with some of our older brands, as well as the passion that lies with our studios as well for some of these brands. Some of those you listed are actually brands our internal teams are quite passionate about. One of the big shifts that we're making in a studio organization is focusing projects and matching them with teams that are great at a particular genre and super passionate about a particular brand. Matching those pairings in a more deliberate and intentional way has been a really big part of how we're shaping our portfolio strategy for the future.

Before Jade Raymond left, Motive was working on reinventing the action-adventure genre with a new IP. Is that team still working on that project?
They are working on a new IP, and then one established IP that we will probably talk about sooner rather than later. The new IP is something we are incredibly inspired, motivated, and excited about. It's exciting because they are rethinking how to bring relevant contemporary content to the market in a way that is important for millennials and Gen Z players. They have taken a new turn with the IP and with the project, but I think in an incredibly productive, exciting way. They're thinking about user-generated content and procedurally generated environments and missions. It's something I think is fresh for not just EA, but for the industry at large.

Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy recently mentioned they're considering a new Knights of the Old Republic project. Did that pitch come from EA?
We can't really talk about pitches we're making between our partners. But I will go back to what we discussed earlier about matching studios and teams to not only what they are great at, but what they love and what they're passionate about. Knights of the Old Republic is one of the hallmarks of BioWare's past. It's something the team is very passionate about, but I really can't say or disclose or talk about a project or a partnership there. BioWare has a lot of history. You mentioned Mass Effect, and we certainly are working on the next Dragon Age. Where that team is going to point their energy, talent, and resources after that, they have several options. Would it be a new IP? Are we thinking about Anthem? Are we thinking about Mass Effect? And of course we'd certainly look at Knights of the Old Republic.

EA Sports has been a stable part of your business for a long time. But the one glaring hole that's been there since MVP was canceled is baseball. Do you still have conversations with the MLB?
We have conversations with all sports entities. EA Sports isn't just a brand in video gaming, it is genuinely a brand that is part of the lifestyle of sports in general. We work, talk to, and speak with all sports partners. Even some things that we have done in our past, baseball being one, but there are others as well. We have started and will be bringing some new games to our sports portfolio in the next few years. We have a new generation of hardware coming, and it's always a pretty notable inflection point for us to think about the opportunities in a new era of gaming. Sports is always at the tip of the spear when those shifts happen in the industry.

The new console generation is almost upon us. What are some of the innovations your group is excited to explore with more horsepower at their disposal?
Horsepower is always a great topic for us to discuss as we think about a new era of hardware. The thing I'm most excited about is when new hardware comes, it's a moment in time for us to think differently about how we engage with players. The horsepower will bring things such as higher fidelity and better graphics, but candidly we haven't spent as much time focused on that as we have about services and how this new generation will bring new platforms to motivate user-generated content, mods, and how players connect socially. We actually get to dare to think more expansively and more broadly about what the innovation's going to bring this time.

Most EA games don't support mods at this stage.
Right, but it's something we are quite passionate about. Of course, you can't discount The Sims 4 or The Sims in general. That kind of created the user-generated content and modification in games. But yes, user-generated content and modifications is something that we are looking at seriously, and will be factored into how we think about our game designs and our portfolio strategy for the future.

The EA Sports games have been $60 for a long time. But ever since the free-to-play model emerged, people have wondered whether these annual games would ever end up going that direction. Are you still leaning toward preserving the $60 approach, or are you investigating taking a different direction?
We're always open. We want as many people playing our games as possible. One of the bigger shifts in the industry, even beyond the hardware, is certainly as you look at different models of how players will come into our games, whether that's free-to-play or subscription. As those models evolve and as players vote with their time with our games, we will evolve and deliver a model and experience and meet them where they are. The idea that today we are so contained to a $60 package good, that does feel confining at times. The future, whether it's free-to-play, subscription, streaming – we're going to have more flexibility in what we can bring to players and even the frequency of content.

Last year we heard about an incubation program led by Kim Swift and Justin Wiebe where they were trying to streamline a way for developers at EA Studios to get their game pitches surfaced to the marketing and business groups so everybody could weigh in on it. Is that program still ongoing?
We actually have a far broader program we rolled out across the entire studio organization. I mandate very little, but one mandate directive that I did instill across our organization is that every studio location has time for game jams, incubation, and idea generation. That was something we rolled out about six or seven months ago. It's been incredibly well received. We're seeing some incredible ideas come from our teams. I was a judge at one of the game jams a few months ago, and I was pretty blown away by what these teams came up with in about three days. I had controller in hand and was able to play four games that were clever, funny, and smart. They were whole games that you could play through. The talent in this organization runs so deep, and so I am motivated to provide as many outlets and possibilities for these team members and the folks to express that. ◆

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1996
Miele joins Westwood Studios as a project manager

1997
Miele gets promoted to VP of marketing

1998
EA acquires Westwood Studios

2003
Miele relocates to the Bay Area to become VP of PC sales for EA

2005
Miele becomes EA's VP of business & strategic planning

2009
EA promotes Miele to group vice president of marketing for the EA Games label

2013
Miele becomes EA's general manager for the Star Wars franchise

2016
Miele assumes Peter Moore's former role as executive vice president of global publishing, and a member of EA's senior executive team

2018
Miele becomes chief studios officer, taking over leadership of EA's worldwide game studios

ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

A roundup of ultrathin and light gaming notebooks

by Ben Reeves

FOR THOSE WHO WANT OVERALL GREAT PERFORMANCE AND STYLE

MSI GS75 Stealth

Based on looks alone, the GS75 is a clear winner. MSI's sandblasted finish and gold trim give this notebook the slick, clean look of an Italian sports car. Thankfully, it has enough tech under the hood to back up that image; we threw everything from The Witcher 3 to Metro Exodus at this racecar and it never slowed down. The system's 17.3-inch, HD, 144Hz display looks fantastic; the keyboard is satisfying to use; and its extra wide glass touchpad feels incredible. With up to three SSD storage slots, this baby has a ton of potential storage space, so you should never have to delete a game again. Unfortunately, the GS75's performance comes with a cost; we only squeezed 2.5 hours of game time from this beast, and after extended use its fan sounds like it's gearing up to mow your lawn. Still, if you can handle a little whir, the MSI GS75 Stealth is a killer gaming machine.

Starting at $1,799 | us.msi.com

OUR BUILD

CPU:
Intel Core i7-9750H

GRAPHICS:
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Max-Q

RAM:
32GB DDR4

STORAGE:
500GB SSD

WEIGHT:
5 lbs.

3D MARK SCORE (TIME SPY):
7,080

BUILD PRICE:
$2,999

FOR THOSE WHO WANT
A PORTABLE VR READY RIG

Origin EVO17-S

Origin's EVO17-S is bulkier than the other laptops we tested, but it still looks sleek, and at only 5.5 pounds it remains portable. For further customization, Origin offers a variety of high-quality paints and laser etchings on the lid. Our Evo remained quiet even when running demanding games, but it also ran hotter than average during extended play sessions. The built-in 17.3-inch, HD, 144Hz display looks great, and features a vibrant range of colors and deep blacks. If you're ready to settle in for a bit, the EVO17-S can support up to three external monitors or a VR headset. Unfortunately, we only got around two hours of game time before reaching for the power cord. The system's full-size keyboard feels a little hollow, but its trackpad is smooth and responsive. Overall, the EVO17-S doesn't excel in any one area, but does everything well.

Starting at $1,800 | originpc.com

OUR BUILD

CPU:
Intel Core i7-9750H

GRAPHICS:
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Max-Q

RAM:
16GB DDR4

STORAGE:
500GB SSD

WEIGHT:
5.5 lbs.

3D MARK SCORE (TIME SPY):
2,392

BUILD PRICE:
$2,630

FOR THOSE WHO WANT
COMPACT POWER

Razer Blade Stealth 13

True to its name, Razer's ultrathin Blade looks sharp. The notebook features a clean and simple look, and the new two-tone logo looks classy. Razer's 13-inch HD display (you can upgrade to 4K) is vivid and bright, and the screen's 4.9mm bezel makes the screen feel larger than it is. Sadly, Razer's built-in speakers lack depth and you'll get the best sound performance using headphones. The Blade ran every game we tested, but titles like Assassin's Creed: Odyssey chugged on their highest settings. Still, this slight dip in performance probably helps Razer make the most of its battery life; we got nearly six hours of play time from a single charge. With a few caveats, Razer has put together another solid gaming machine. ◆

Starting at $1,199 | razer.com

OUR BUILD

CPU:
Intel Core i7-8565U

GRAPHICS:
Nvidia GeForce MX150

RAM:
16GB

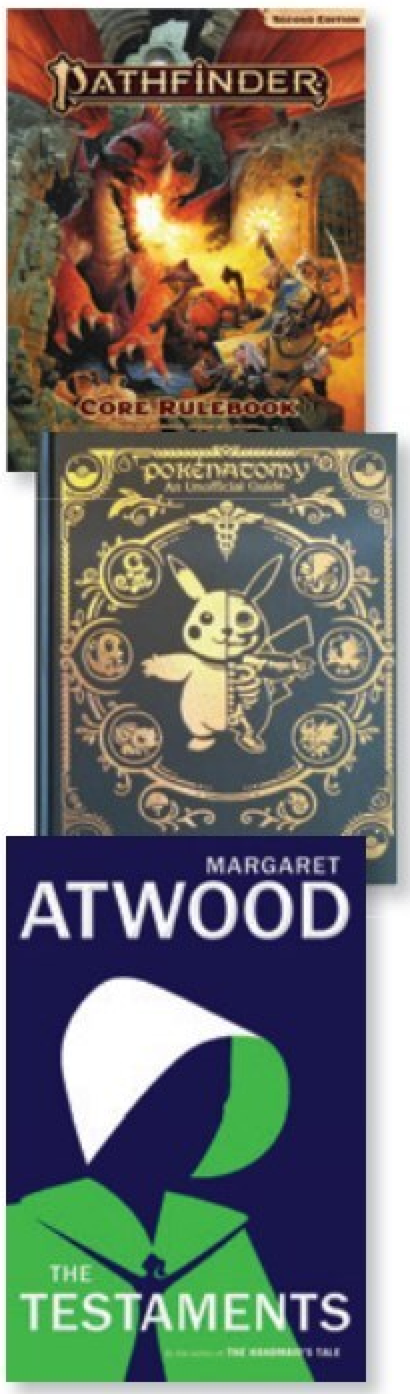
STORAGE:
256GB SSD

WEIGHT:
2.9 lbs.

3D MARK SCORE (TIME SPY):
1,091

BUILD PRICE:
$1,599

Media Shelf



PATHFINDER CORE RULEBOOK 2ND EDITION

This mammoth 600-plus page tome streamlines Paizo's excellent pen-and-paper RPG while maintaining the game's rich fantasy storytelling and character-building options. Ideal for newcomers or veterans.

$59.95
paizo.com

POKÉNATOMY: THE SCIENCE OF POKÉMON

What are Sandshrew's bones made of? Does Tangela perform photosynthesis? Why are Alakazam's shoulders full of neurons? This unofficial guide covers the biologic abnormalities of all of the original 151 Pokémon, complete with anatomical illustrations.

$45.00
etsy.com

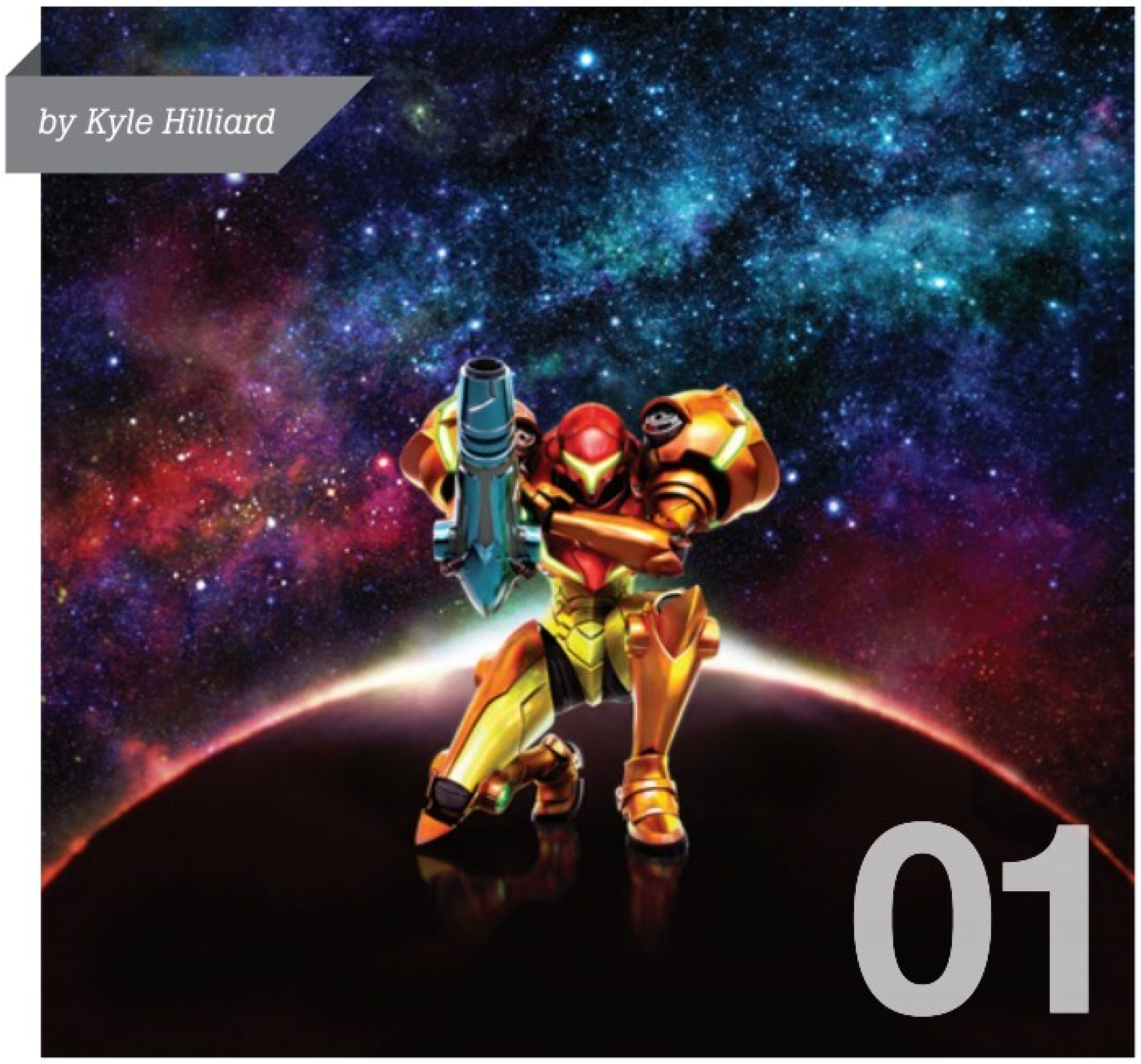
THE TESTAMENTS BY MARGARET ATWOOD

The long awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* continues Offred's story 15 years after the events of the first novel, as she struggles to make a life within an oppressive social order. This sometimes funny, sometimes horrifying story offers snapshots of a dystopia that hits a little close to home.

$28.95
penguinrandomhouse.com

SEQUELS YOU DEMANDED BUT DIDN'T PLAY

by Kyle Hilliard



Metroid: Samus Returns

Samus Returns was well received, but didn't have the impact everyone thought it would considering the decade-plus of fan demand for a 2D Metroid that preceded it. The remake was generally underplayed, and in the aftermath fans started yelling that they want a new 2D Metroid.

Mirror's Edge Catalyst

When players complained about EA's reliance on annualized franchises, there was always an asterisk with Mirror's Edge, the unique first-person parkour game that felt different. The sequel was announced to applause, but when it released, we were all underwhelmed.

Kid Icarus: Uprising

For years, it seemed Kid Icarus was the big NES franchise Nintendo ignored. It took 20 years, but a new Kid Icarus finally released, helmed by Smash Bros. creator Masahiro Sakurai. Unfortunately, we all just shrugged our shoulders while rubbing our sore wrists.

Duke Nukem Forever

Forever is proof that the phrase "good things come to those who wait" is not always true. Frequently thought dead and canceled despite fan fervor, Duke Nukem Forever finally released in 2011 and was quickly forgotten as a game, but remembered as a cautionary tale.

Okamiden

Okami has been ported numerous times to myriad platforms, but everyone forgets there is a full-on sequel starring a puppy Amaterasu. It released on DS a few days before the launch of the 3DS, which might be why it flew under the radar.

Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII

Final Fantasy VII is one of Square Enix's most successful games. Plenty of numbered Final Fantasy entries followed it, but fans clamored for a direct sequel to VII. They got one in 2006, but the less said about it the better. Crisis Core only fared a little better.

Nights: Journey of Dreams

The original Nights was a Sega Saturn exclusive that did 3D platforming and gameplay about a month before Mario 64 and Crash Bandicoot. After years of demand, a sequel released on Wii and served as a good reminder that 3D gameplay had moved on a fair bit in the intervening years.

King's Quest (2015)

The classic point-and-click adventure series is a beloved PC staple of the '80s and '90s. The reimaging boasted celebrity acting talent, modernized gameplay mechanics, and a new story that treated the originals as canon… but few made it all the way to the final episode.

Dishonored 2

The first Dishonored was a hit against the odds with its unique world and flexible stealth gameplay. Bethesda quickly greenlit a sequel, publicly boasting it had a new franchise on its hands. But despite its quality, the follow-up didn't have the same impact.

Thief (2014)

The Thief series was among the first to successfully empower players to become first-person stealth ninjas. The genre grew and expanded significantly in the 10 years between Deadly Shadows and 2014, and when we finally got a new entry, it snuck by with few taking notice. ◆

❶

September2019

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 03
- › Catherine: Full Body (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Spyro Reignited Trilogy (Switch, PC)
- › Torchlight II (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

Wednesday 04
- › Warsaw (PC)

Friday 06
- › Monster Hunter World: Iceborne (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 10
- › Gears 5 (Xbox One, PC)
- › Greedfall (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › PES 2020 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › The Walking Dead: The Telltale Definitive Series (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 13
- › Borderlands 3 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Daemon X Machina (Switch)
- › Grid (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › NHL 20 (PS4, Xbox One)

Tuesday 17
- › Destiny 2: Shadowkeep (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 20
- › Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch Remastered (PS4, Switch, PC)
- › The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening (Switch) ❶

Tuesday 24
- › Contra: Rogue Corps (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- › Dead By Daylight (Switch)
- › The Surge 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 27
- › Code Vein (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › FIFA 20 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Monday 30
- › Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 06
- › It: Chapter Two (theaters)

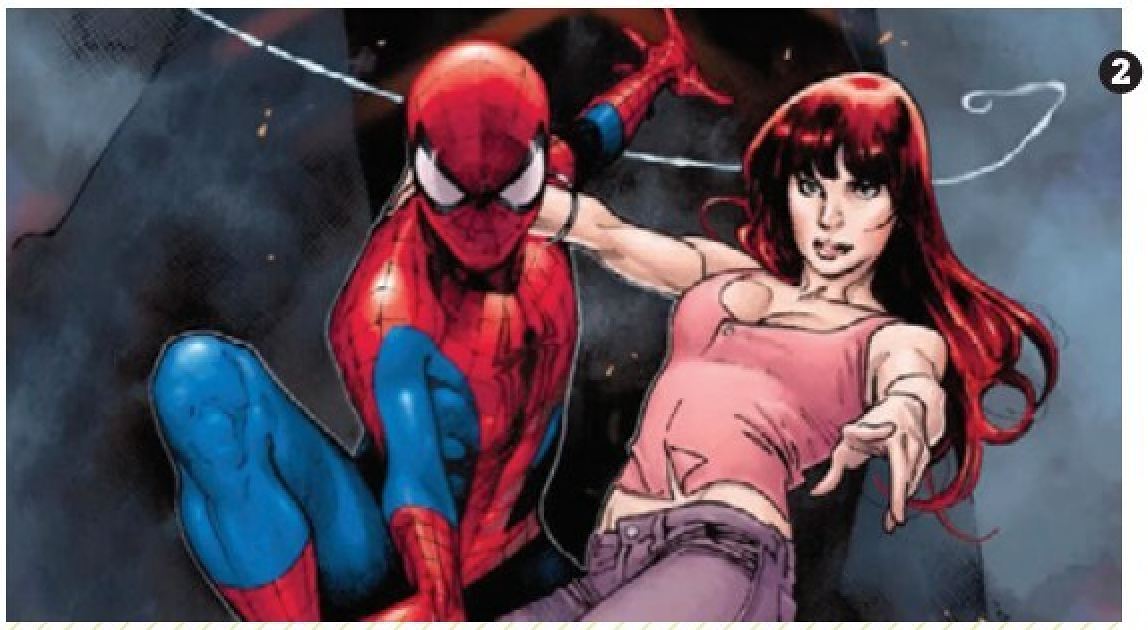
Friday 20
- › Between Two Ferns: The Movie (Netflix)
- › Disenchantment (Netflix)
- › Downton Abbey (theaters)
- › Rambo: Last Blood (theaters)

Wednesday 25
- › Survivor (CBS)

Thursday 26
- › Evil (CBS)
- › The Good Place (NBC)
- › Superstore (NBC)

Friday 27
- › Abominable (theaters)
- › The Politician (Netflix)

Sunday 29
- › Godfather of Harlem (Epix)



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GAMER CULTURE

Sunday 01

PAX West

This massive expo has something for every type of gamer, with even a dedicated hall for handheld gaming. This year's Penny Arcade Expo runs for four days in Seattle's massive convention center, and is loaded with panels, performances, tournaments, and plenty of shopping.

Wednesday 04

J.J. Abrams' Spider-Man ❷

Movie director J.J. Abrams and his son Henry are writing a five-issue Spider-Man series that kicks off this month. With art by Sara Pichelli, this story introduces a new villain named Cadverous.

Thursday 12

Tokyo Game Show

Final Fantasy VII Remake is expected to be one of the big games shown at this year's Tokyo Game Show, a four-day consumer expo expected to draw more than 250,000 people. If Nintendo and Sony show up, there's a good chance we'll see more from Pokémon Sword & Shield and Death Stranding. Tune in to gameinformer.com for all of the latest news from this show.

Friday 27

TwitchCon San Diego

Along with a stage dedicated to esports competitions, this three-day gathering gives everyone the chance to set up their gear and start streaming. Some of the biggest streamers on Twitch will be on hand for meet and greets and live shows. Games Done Quick is also here to quickly race through some of the best games to date.

Sunday 29

Overwatch League Finals

At 3:00 p.m. ET, the two best teams in Overwatch League will complete for a $1,100,000 prize pool in a first-to-four-map series. This battle of the titans will be streamed online, but you can also head to Philadelphia's Wells Fargo Center to watch it in person.

» PLATFORM	» STYLE	» PUBLISHER	» DEVELOPER	» RELEASE
PS4 • Xbox One • PC	1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online)	Activision	Infinity Ward	October 25

REIMAGINING CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

Infinity Ward embraces small-scale skirmishes and all-out war with a new multiplayer suite in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

BY

DANIEL TACK

SOMETIMES, YOU HAVE TO GO BACK TO FORGE AHEAD.

While Modern Warfare treads into the murky realm of reboots, it reimagines the concepts and ideas that made Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare the highly acclaimed shooter that paved the way for the last decade of gunplay design, in both single-player and multiplayer forms. The 2007 title examined a war against a known enemy, but today many wars are fought without uniforms and clear enemies on a world stage. This new entry aims to reflect that, and Infinity Ward is pulling out all the stops to give fans the complete experience they've come to expect from this series.

The single-player campaign returns after a year hiatus, and it's looking like an emotional rollercoaster with an unblinking eye toward the harsh, gritty realities of all-too-often glorified war. A new engine taps into photogrammetry to take realism and authenticity to new levels. Multiplayer has modes big and small, splitscreen support, and even a co-op experience. What's more, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare features crossplay across PS4, Xbox One, and PC, with dedicated servers for everyone – and this is only scratching the surface of what's in store.

Infinity Ward believes Call of Duty: Modern Warfare will once again transform the brand into a fresh entity, tapping into modern-day inspirations for the campaign and providing a multitude of multiplayer modes. We traveled to Infinity Ward's headquarters in Los Angeles to find out what makes this upcoming entry in the annual franchise special.

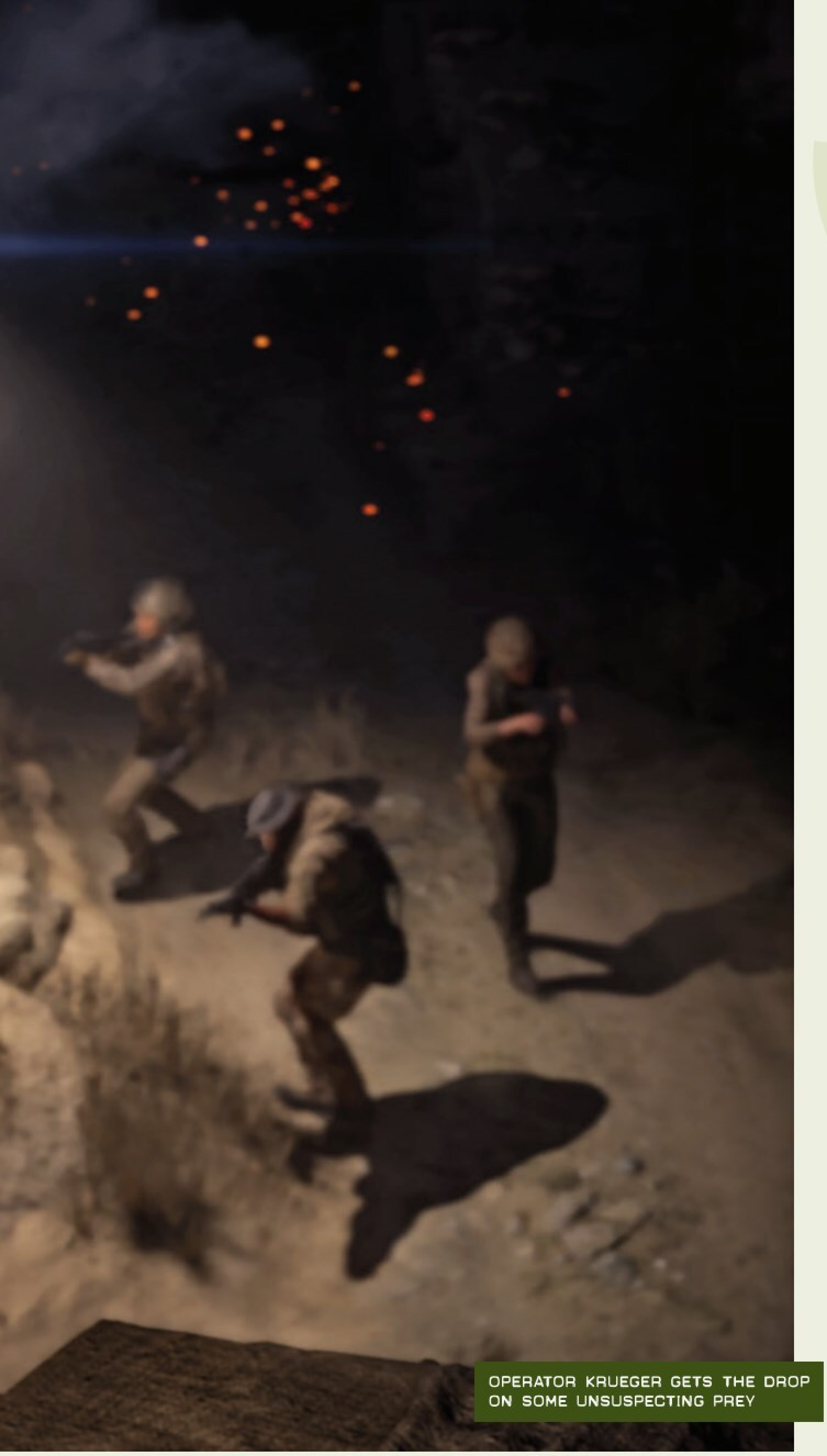
MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

Call of Duty campaigns often provide players with some story for their shooter, but the lifeblood and longevity of this series is the multiplayer modes. Looking for a quick match without the frenzied respawn race? Get suited up for Gunfight. Prefer traditional modes like team deathmatch? They're here. Want a spicy new take on Search and Destroy? That's here too. What about playing in a gargantuan warzone with 64 players, or doing a pitch-black midnight dance of death with night vision and no HUD? Fans can expect plenty of new experiences along the way. As always, Call of Duty attempts to satiate the hungriest of multiplayer connoisseurs with a robust buffet of offerings, and I get to sample what's in store, going hands-on with a few different modes.

It's my first time playing Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, and I'm spending a lot of time on the loadout screen. The Gunsmith feature allows for deep gun-customization opportunities, and I'm having trouble determining which loadout to bring to a round of team deathmatch on the new Azhir Cave map. With a spotty arrangement of blown-out buildings in a dusty daytime Middle Eastern desert, Azhir Cave is what's known internally at Infinity Ward as a tactical map – a smaller battle space more designed for special-forces incursions than full-scale war. I eventually opt for an old favorite and rip the powerful two-shot shotgun apart and transform it into a close-range cannon with massive recoil. This gun allows me to run around at high speed, jumping around the scenery and getting in close in order to unleash a lethal blow with any solid shot. Just in case that wasn't enough, I select special stopping power rounds as my field upgrade, which is a new cooldown-based ability in your loadout. Field upgrades give players potent skills like deployable cover or munitions crates that are powerful but not overwhelming like an "ultimate" ability from Black Ops 4. Once you're comfortable with the field-upgrade system, you can equip two of them at once, and then select which one you'd like to use with a simple button press, giving you some situational opportunities.

When we load into Azhir Cave, I notice I'm not standing with a team waiting for the clock to tick down to the match's start. Instead, there are custom infil animations with your team arriving at the field of play via truck, chopper, or van. It's a small touch, but a nice bit of immersion before a match begins.

A few minutes into the match, I notice a striking amount of mobility options on the map. Whether I'm running up a broken-down tower stairway that ends abruptly and vaulting onto a rickety walkway



OPERATOR KRUEGER GETS THE DROP ON SOME UNSUSPECTING PREY

or finding back-routes through the rubble, there are a surprising amount of options for interacting with the play space other than simply traveling down a corridor and finding cover. Azhir Cave is divided between an exterior littered with buildings and a winding cave area to sneak around in. Some places on the map feel sort of like a jungle gym, with vaulting and climbing options offering quick ways to get access to areas. I take one of these approaches to get into a blown-out building two enemies are using as a sniper roost. The first one goes down in a single well-placed body shot, but I'm stuck reloading before getting to the second (yes, I miss the second shot because, let me reiterate, that modded gun I made has some serious kick). Luckily, the second opponent doesn't even see me come up from behind and is fiddling around with some kind of killstreak perk, so I refill both barrels for another salvo. While the strike my foe is dialing up would have been safe to call down from a hidden corner in another Call of Duty title, in Modern Warfare most of these special skills require line of sight.

"That was the design direction for a lot of these," says multiplayer design director Geoff Smith. "I think when you pull up the little map and you can call an ordnance on any space in the world that gives you too much range, you can grief a lot of people. [Now] you must pull up the binoculars and get line of sight on where you're going. You have to actually get to a good vantage point and call in these things in to be effective. We just don't give it to you for free."

A variety of doors bar entrance to some of the housing on the map, but they can be engaged in a multitude of ways. The simplest way is opening them with a button press. You can also "peek" by opening them slowly while looking down the sights to see what's beyond, or blow them to kingdom come with C4 or other explosives. You can also sprint through them to try and get the jump on whoever's in that room. Doors come in a variety of materials like wood or metal, but all of them feature some element of bullet penetration, meaning there's no completely safe stronghold. Emphasis on breaching adds a subtle but important element to working your way around traditional Call of Duty spaces.

Sprinting is unlimited in Modern Warfare, so you can hustle across the field quickly. Using the new "tactical sprint," an even faster dash with your gun held high, it's easy to traverse large spaces quickly.

One element that sticks out as I play this reinvented multiplayer is all player ranges are catered to in some fashion. Clearly, some maps and situations are better suited to short, medium, or long-range fare, but everything seems to have a place in the ecosystem.

"I think a lot of the games recently have been focusing on SMG [submachine gun] range, and not supporting the role of a sniper," Smith says. "We have to build stuff so every gun is viable, and everybody has their positions and their roles. If you don't support snipers, then you have to try to quick scope because that gun is useless at those ranges. I'm in a second-story window with an AR and I'm trying to keep the close-range guys from getting inside the base. They're going to own on the interior, so the game is to keep them at bay and keep them from closing."

After the match, players are treated to something that's now almost a staple in session-based games: a play of the game replay, where my riotous shotgun rampage was featured in a small, entertaining slice.

Smooth Operator

Operators are divided into two larger buckets in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, the Coalition and Allegiance. Characters are unlocked through gameplay and come with their own various personalities, appearances, voices, executions, and skins. From a top-level perspective, Coalition characters are more Western-themed, and Allegiance more Eastern in terms of visuals. You start with one "default" soldier on each side and unlock the more interesting characters one by one, with each having an introduction video reel that showcases their style.

For instance, the menacing-looking Krueger keeps his face covered at all times, and you can mess with that by swapping skins from a gas mask to net mesh and more. Skins affect the character's entire look, so you won't be putting on custom shoes, shirts, or hats for each character in each slot; one skin determines the appearance for the whole character and can accentuate your gun selections or personality.

Most of the skins we saw are very "true-to-warfare" options, but there's no telling if Activision will take things down a different path post launch (if the past tells us anything, things might get considerably more outlandish sometime after release). You can also change a character's execution to add some additional flavor to those savory behind-the-back kills.

THE NEW FACE OF SEARCH AND DESTROY

One of the new modes in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare is Cyber Attack, which the studio states is its attempt to create a better version of Search and Destroy. Here, teams attempt to pick up an EMP bomb that's placed between both teams and deliver it to a data center. Instead of having teams swap between offense and defense, both teams are after the bomb and must place it and protect it to win.

Dropping into a match in a tightly knit present-day cityscape and grabbing the bomb, I discover another elegant touch that adds some additional depth to the game – the EMP bomb comes with a heartbeat sensor that shows you the location of all your enemies. This allows you to find the best possible route to deliver the package, even sneaking by entire enemy teams.

I take this opportunity to switch off my tried-and-true shotgun and mess around with a marksman rifle, using the Gunsmith to tailor a medium- to long-range weapon that packs a huge punch. Running from window to window to provide cover for teammates converging on the delivery point, I see yet another one of the mechanics that makes this Modern Warfare different: mounting.

On any space where it would make sense, such as barrels, doorways, windows, crates, etc., you can take cover and mount your weapon off the side for additional sway and recoil reduction. Mounting is a great way to both assess the situation with a degree of safety and land some steadied shots on enemies in the area.

"We talked to SEALs about, 'Hey, if you're moving through and clearing a house, and you're left behind, do you ever post up?' And they're like, 'Yeah, I'll take whatever stability I can get.' So you can go to a doorframe,'" says multiplayer design director Joe Cecot. "If you think about it in first-person, it's very hard to tell where your character is. If you try and circle a door in first-person, you can't really tell how exposed you are. But this allows you to really know [you're] only exposed a little bit. It also allows us as devs to push the guy out enough to create the silhouette so there's gameplay there. Then we give you substantial recoil and sway [reduction] bonuses on the weapon."

Leaving my mounted position, I quickly run down an alleyway to reunite with my teammates and notice a small disc rising up off the ground. It's a proximity mine, similar in form and function to a Bouncing Betty, and it blows me the hell up. While these are excellent anti-vehicle deterrents, they are also quite lethal for the unsuspecting ground troop when placed in areas they will probably be moving too quickly through to avoid. I'm dead, but death is rarely the end in Cyber Attack.

Cyber Attack is a one-life-only mode with a catch: You can be resurrected or picked up after dying at any time during play by teammates. This ruleset creates an interesting dynamic where the attacking team may feel like they have a huge advantage as they plant the bomb and take up defensive positions, but the other team can come back from a single soldier to full numbers quickly and descend on the point with superior forces. Several times during the games I played, one team was down to a single person who shuffled around, bringing allies back up, and then used numerical superiority to take out the bomb site at the last possible moment.

Load Up On The Loadout

In many ways, the gun is the primary character in Modern Warfare's multiplayer suite. "What if your gun was an MMO character? What does that look like? How do you start creating your character and start leveling them up and modifying and changing these things?" asks multiplayer design director Geoff Smith. "We even played with the idea of letting the Barbarian learn some spells." You can make a sniper shotgun or a short-range AR, and that's just the beginning – the guncraft is extensive and expansive.

I've never been more overwhelmed or elated checking out my weapon options in a Call of Duty game. The Gunsmith system highlights your "create a class" loadout on a spiffy workbench as you tinker with barrels, stocks, lasers, scopes, and more. With 50 to 60 different attachments on weapons, the player can cobble together all manner of Frankenstein fare, from sniper-style shotguns to run-and-gun blitz builds. Players can select up to five various modifications on each weapon, and taking parts off a weapon sometimes makes as significant a difference as leaving them on – like ripping the barrel off a shotgun to create a lightweight, close-range terror. Snapping attachments on and off to create crazy concoctions is fast and easy, and you can even change your loadout during a multiplayer match without having to hop back to the lobby. Get destroyed by an opponent and want to tap into their kit? A single button press allows you to copy their loadout for your own use. Your weapon progression carries over from mode to mode, so you can finesse your options in all kinds of multiplayer and the co-op experience.

Each slot clearly identifies the advantages and disadvantages to using or removing each attachment, whether you're trying to increase your effective range, reduce sway, boost your mobility, or even add on some melee potential. The system is designed around weighing the pluses and minuses, so there's rarely a "must-add" decision. Rather, you make choices based around your playstyle with each weapon and loadout.

In addition to the obscene amount of customization within your primary and secondary weapon slots, you have three perk slots to work with. These include classic fare like scavenger to resupply on the fly, methods to keep you hidden from UAVs, and ways to track enemies with lingering heat signatures.

Selecting your killstreaks (up to three of them) is once again part of the Call of Duty experience. The decision to go with killstreaks over scorestreaks may end up being slightly divisive, but fans of the scorestreak shouldn't be dismayed – the developers have thrown an optional perk in the game to convert your experience to the scorestreak if you want to use that system. Killstreaks run the gamut, and you can use your own little personal UAV, a multitude of strikes, vehicles, and more leading up to the big 15-killstreak Juggernaut, where the player becomes a durable machine of death with a huge gun and unstoppable armor.

You have both a lethal and tactical auxiliary item slot, which is where you slot in your grenades, mines, flashbangs, and other useful limited-supply tools. Then there's the field-upgrade slot. Field upgrades can easily be likened to an "ultimate" ability because they are cooldown-based, but are often more subtle than other games that feature such systems. You can call in munition crates, pilot recon drones, or set up a tactical insertion, allowing you to mark your next spawn point. Each ability in the field-upgrade system comes with a fast, medium, or slow cooldown, commensurate with its potential game impact.

Finally, there's a bit of flavor if you want to get really wild. Dubbed the "Tamagunchi" (yes, like that cute little digital pet), players have a variety of watchlike armwear that not only tells the time accurately but also … feeds. The Tamagunchi can be happy or sad, and squawks and barks at you based on your activities. The designs include things like a traditional analog watch, Fitbit-style bands, stat-trackers, and more. If you don't take care of it, your little friend can also expire, but we're not sure exactly what that entails – it appears to simply be an accent system with a lot of personality and fun, so you're probably not going to get too stressed out about your little buddy dying.

MASTERING NIGHT VISION IS CRITICAL TO PLAYING IN DARK ENVIRONMENTS

The Mode That Got Away

One mode, known as Combat Outpost, never made it into Call of Duty: Modern Warfare. Combat Outpost had two teams spawning on either side of the map, with only one capture point accessible at any given time. In a sort of tug-of-war, players would first fight over the big middle capture spot, and then either push forward or drop back based on the result to battle over the next point, until one team was finally pushed back to their final point and forced to defend or take a loss. Contextual rewards for capping changed the dynamic of the game and created situations where a big comeback could happen even after being pushed back to a final point. It's not a wholly new concept in shooters, and conjures up notions of Frontlines in Battlefield.

The linear push-and-pull contest over five points and an eventual bomb drop in the final zone never quite coalesced, though Smith recounts some fond moments when a package drop in one of the final areas spawned a Juggernaut kit that let the team come back and push all the way to the opposing "goal" for a big win.

While the mode didn't come together for a final game inclusion, there's no doubt that aspects and ideas from the design made their way into other modes like Ground War. The team is still playing around with new modes and designs, so there's a possibility we may see some of those post-launch as well.

ALL OUT WAR

The final multiplayer mode I tour is a new take on something the franchise has done before, Ground War, which fans of Battlefield will find similar to Conquest mode. Infinity Ward is currently testing a player count of 64 for this mode, and it hints at even bigger player counts being possible.

Spawning into a player-controlled armored personnel carrier, I'm tasked with what boils down to a giant game of Domination, with five different cap points on a gigantic map featuring vehicles, choppers, and more in a chaotic downtown setting, complete with skyscrapers and a bank. From a massive overhead view before each spawn, you can select the location to shoot down onto the huge field of play, including into allied APCs that can be used to quickly traverse the battlefield. Instead of having set classes and roles, you're free to whip up customized loadouts like you would in standard multiplayer. I quickly learn as I'm gunned down in an open road that I won't be able to play this map anything like standard multiplayer maps. There's lots of open space, huge sightlines from key landmarks, and areas with sparse cover. I'm going to have to adapt to large-scale invasion, tactical cover, and rolling with teammates for effective results.

"When we first started, people were really uneasy about the battle maps and open-field combat," Smith says. "A lot of guys who play Call of Duty are used to the corridor – very intimate fights. I had one designer come up to me that was like, 'In this map, there's no cover here. How do I deal with a guy from that far distance?' This is kind of educating people in these techniques. If you never played Arma, or never played older Battlefields where you had to deal with closing these distances, this is how you do it. Throw a smoke that'll create cover for you. Then we throw it, and by the time it took them to get to the next piece of cover the smoke had dissipated. I was like, 'We gotta fix this; we've got to make sure the smoke is there long enough for your sprint speed to get you to the next piece of cover.' Because all of our environments are all built around certain engagement distance, and that's the lifeblood of the way our game feels."

Ground War centers on multiple landmarks and smaller skirmishes in the distances between them. The enemy team sets up shop with deployable shields out in front of the bank capture point, daring anyone to come anywhere close to its unapproachable steps. Choppers fly by, smashing into buildings as small whorls of infantry scatter and merge from cover on the streets below. Somewhere in the distance, I hear the sounds of a Juggernaut kit going off, as the player moves in to massacre the bank defenders. However, this is all window dressing to my task at hand: working with two other random allies to capture a point in a little plaza between towering buildings, making assailing the spot a low visibility task with high danger for anyone pushing in. I try out one of the new tools that Infinity Ward is bringing to the fray, the snapshot grenade, to get an idea of what's behind the walls ahead. This tool provides the player with a "snapshot" of the area after it goes off, offering essential intel of the spot you're about to breach. A children's toy that Smith's son received for Christmas inspired this new thermal-imaging device, which resembles a mini disco-ball and gives invaluable intel.

After collecting the snapshot, I take point and surge in, eliminating one of the defenders with a few well-aimed shots. A hail of gunfire buries me shortly after from several other positions, but we end up taking the point. Ground War is all about forging colossal experiences and big battles from out of pure pandemonium, so if you're looking for something outside the norm on an epic scale, Ground War just might be the answer.

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Campaign Intensity

Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare had one of my favorite campaigns in the entire series, and campaign gameplay director Jacob Minkoff and studio narrative director Taylor Kurosaki are back to furnish their second tale for Infinity Ward after their departure from Naughty Dog. Brief glimpses show a refurbished fan favorite, Captain Price, plays a role in the game, but we don’t know what other characters from the original Modern Warfare will have new roles. However, we have been introduced to other characters with tragic and violent beginnings, like two children ripped from a war-torn country, Farah and Hadir. Farah and Hadir play important primary roles in the story after enduring a gut-wrenching ordeal in their youth. You witness the struggle from multiple lenses over the course of the campaign with different characters shaping the story, one that the player experiences through different perspectives of a conflict that defies traditional good and bad moral positions. Today, warfare rarely has clear-cut sides, and Modern Warfare seeks to explore those situations with emotion and intensity. Infinity Ward doesn’t want to shy away from the brutal realities of conflict that most of us are far removed from, enjoying from the sidelines as mere stories.

A covert night-time assault on a terrorist cell in a London townhouse showcases some of the murky situations the player is faced with during a mission. Doors blow open in the dark, sometimes revealing women, children, and other non-combatants. You can blow out lights. You can shoot through walls. Should you risk firing at unseen targets? Is the target deadly? Is that hostage really a hostage or is she ready to grab the weapon nearby and take you and your squad out? A woman reaches for something on a desk – do you gun her down? Analyzing intent is something you must do quickly and decisively. Systems are in place to punish the player for slaughtering non-combatants, and the penalties may be just as harsh as getting shot dead yourself.

“What we train players to understand is you will fail if you kill people who turn out to be innocent or non-combatants,” says campaign gameplay director Jacob Minkoff. “But everybody is an unknown until they are either secured or they demonstrate hostile intent. A good example of that is if you see your guys securing people as you move through. As you come into the kitchen, your guy grabs the woman who’s coming through the door. She’s secure, she is no longer a threat, don’t worry about it. But there are actions people take as you enter a room where you can mistake it for hostile intent. We have branching reactions from your allies, and the game tallies your actions. If you cause too much collateral damage, which is the official term for causing the killing of people who should not have been killed, the game will fail you. We have pretty complex heuristics where we’re basically trying to determine, are you acting like a proper soldier, or are you kind of being a [psychopath]?’

Another stage later in the game, called Hometown, is a stealth-style, flashback mission following Farah as a child, hammering home the point that these brutal incursions occur in someone’s hometown. Farah’s violent baptism in the horrors of war involves watching family die, using hit-and-run tactics to kill an oppressive assailant in a grisly fashion, escaping poison gas, and witnessing firsthand the ghoulish realities of mercenary warfare. The mission is emotionally impactful and incredibly intense as you pilot a child dodging death at every

turn, and somehow manages to avoid being gratuitous or garish, content to put on display situations that are probably occurring in the real world this very moment.

After a small contingent of the press got to see the various campaign demos earlier this year, questions arose whether the game was going too far with its presentation of mature topics. My personal view after witnessing said demos is that these unflinching gazes that evoke emotional responses from the player are well done and effective. Taylor Kurosaki weighs in on the concept of whether some topics should be off-limits for games:

"Things we've been hearing is people say something like, well, do you think it's a good idea, for you guys to be tackling this sort of subject matter? And I always want to say back to them, 'Do you think it would be a good idea for there to be subject matters that should be off the table?'" he asks, noting that if books or films or TV can cover these subjects, why would games be excluded? "To me, that's a really scary proposition to say, 'that's off limits for games', because that's like saying, well should you have a film like *American Sniper*? People use the term game. And game is such a broad term, it's everything from Candy Crush to The Last of Us. And in the same way that film and TV is everything from *Teletubbies* to *American Sniper*. So to say that you shouldn't tackle that? Well, then should you say that movies shouldn't tackle those subjects too? Should everything be *Teletubbies*? Because I don't want to live in a world where all of my games are the equivalent of *Teletubbies*."

Modern day Farah is a fearless moral crusader battling against the Russian General Roman Barkov, who Kurosaki likens to Colonel Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now*. Barkov uses forced labor camps, chemical weapons, airstrikes, and other tools of terror to accomplish his goals. Farah has seen firsthand what a "do anything it takes to get the job done" approach can do, and hence follows a strict code in her own approach to war.

In some missions, you're part of a tight-knit squad where your allies fit both narrative and functional roles – they're not just disengaged soldiers that sometimes pop out of cover to fire in the distance. You're still running point in a lot of situations to fit gameplay needs, but there's a sense that you're part of a bigger unit, with every piece of the machine moving in tandem.

WATCHES AND WRISTWARE CAN BE TINKERED WITH AS FUN ACCESSORIES

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GOING DARK

While plenty of tweaks, additions, and changes to traditional multiplayer shake things up, I was not prepared for what came next. For the next play session, we switched on both night and realism mode – a variant of the "hardcore" modifier from Call of Duty. In realism mode, U.I. is basically nonexistent, players have full health (as opposed to half health in hardcore), and headshots pack an even deadlier punch than normal. Night mode combined with realism changes the Call of Duty experience so much it almost feels like a suspenseful, stealthy horror-film scenario instead of the grounded shooter we're familiar with. Moving around Azhir Cave becomes a silent incursion where the enemy could be right in front of you and without night vision enabled, you'd never even know. It's tense, lifelike, and eerily quiet, with the realistic graphics lending credibility to the backdrop.

"We never really had the balls to do dark corners and dark things, so at first we were like, 'Let's just turn the lights down a little bit,'" Smith says. "Within one playtest it was like, 'Nope, turn them off' because you're just going to keep chasing your tail forever until you just do one or zero. So we turned it all off. That played the best of any of them."

GO FULL JUGGERNAUT AND TAKE ON AN ENTIRE ARMY

Night vision is a blessing and a curse. Toggling it on, you can see around the maps, which have huge pockets of pitch black and scattered low lighting. There are even light switches you can punch on and off to change the dynamic around you. You're also at the mercy of bright light nuking your vision with it on, so you may want to find a dark corner and scrunch around with your apparatus off, waiting for someone to slink by. Aiming is a huge liability with night mode engaged, as every raise to aim down sights gives your position away, with your bright laser showing up clearly to anyone in the vicinity. Infinity Ward consulted SEALs to determine that "you can't cheat the rifle," and how with the night vision on, you aim with the laser without fully aiming down sights.

"Some of the guys on the team were like, 'That won't work. Why are you doing this?' And we tried it and found it was actually really fun," Smith says. "Like, you'd all of a sudden see a laser over there. If I ADS [aim down sights], I'll give them my position, I need to move. "And we started looking at the game in a different way."

Moving around corners quietly and looking for any sign of enemy presence turns the frenzy-fueled Call of Duty dance into a different beast entirely, a mode where tracking, precision, silence, and careful movements take the stage over gun-toting rampages. Taking off my NVG for a breather, I'm shocked at just how dark the map is without it – many places you can't see anything. It's pitch black. There's no HUD. There are no hit markers. Heck, you don't even know if you've downed that creeping target in the distance. It's a feeling completely alien to Call of Duty multiplayer. And in the darkness, there's probably someone creeping up behind you.

This brings us to a great spot to highlight another new feature in Modern Warfare, a mostly cosmetic, but welcome, addition: executions. This term has been used in previous Call of Duty entries, but has been tied to different mechanics. In this new title, moving up behind an opponent and executing a melee attack results in a special animation and a one-shot takedown. Players can add flair by changing characters or equipping cosmetic executions for a big "gotcha" moment, like when I got snuck up behind and brutally stabbed in the neck as I took in the shadowy sights of night mode.

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TIE DOWN
TIE DOWN

SNACK-SIZE SHOOTING

The new Gunfight mode is essentially Call of Duty distilled down to its purest form. 2v2, no respawning, no health regeneration, 40-second matches, and a quick flag capture if things go beyond time. Both teams have access to the same semi-random collection of primary, secondary, lethal, and tactical weapons, but there aren't any killstreaks here, making it about as pure as the action can get. The maps designed for Gunfight are small and symmetrical (known as "Flash" maps internally) to facilitate the fast, frenzied action. You often start a match no more than a stone's throw away from the other team. Like many of the franchise's now popular formats, modes, and innovations, the core began with just a few dedicated developers tinkering around with something on their own time, and then grew into something much bigger. In this case, the development team was running a fast 2v2 environment so they could test things quickly, and they unexpectedly stumbled upon a recipe for success.

"There was the old Face Off stuff from Modern Warfare 3 that was kind of popular, but those maps were much bigger," Smith says. "It just started taking off and those guys were working weekends. It was a little kind of passion project. We never really scheduled out time against it or anything. Eventually we were like, 'All right, this thing's not going away and it's really fun, let's put some time and effort into it.' We just kept coming back to the rotating loadouts and the fairness and everything was really organic. It was just this spark that hit, and they just kept catching fire."

Gunfight loadout options aren't completely random, as they come out of a pool Infinity Ward can alter and mess with at any time, which will likely lead to themed weekends or events that stick players with pistols only, rocket launcher soirees, or other interesting modifiers. One of the often-neglected market segments Gunfight seems primed to satiate is couch co-op, where you and a friend seated next to each other can queue up for a lightning-fast match against other players online.

Another important feature of Gunfight that may carry over toward other modes as the team builds it out is an automated tournament system. Players can queue up in a tournament-style playlist with brackets and participate in a more competitive experience, and even spectate other games taking place in the tournament after wrapping up their rounds to gain some intel on other teams or just to witness a pro pistol headshot or stray rocket kill.

MODIFY YOUR LOADOUT UNTIL IT'S PERFECT FOR YOUR PLAYSTYLE

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare has some mighty big boots on the ground to fill, but with a combination of characters, combat, and customization, all the ingredients are there for something special. With a three-pronged attack of campaign, multiplayer, and a co-op experience that we don't know much about yet, the recipe looks strong to deliver a game worthy of the title of a shooter that changed the landscape of gaming forever. Gunfight is a refreshing bite-sized battle I'm eager to dive into with a partner, the gunsmith looks to have hours and hours of delicious deliberation before diving into classic multiplayer modes, and Ground War is poised to bring about lively campfire tales of daring raids and explosive defeats. I'm looking forward to seeing how it all fares as a complete package come October.

For more on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, head to gameinformer.com/modernwarfare all month long for exclusive features, interviews, and impressions

Beware The Witch

Bloober Team introduces a new twist to *The Blair Witch Project* in an interactive format

by Elise Favis

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Lionsgate Games,
Bloober Team

» Developer
Bloober Team

» Release
August 30

During Microsoft's E3 press conference, a mysterious trailer showed a man running through a forest with just a flashlight in hand and a dog by his side. Was it Alan Wake 2? Another Slenderman entry? Or maybe an entirely new horror IP? The audience whispered these questions to one another, until finally the words "Blair Witch" appeared onscreen. The coliseum erupted in enthusiastic applause as many appreciated the surprise, realizing this was a game they didn't know they wanted.

The announcement came out of left field; it's been 20 years since the release of the film *The Blair Witch Project*, which tells the story of three young film students embarking on a trip to the insidious Black Hills Forest to investigate a supernatural legend. The video game tells its own unique tale about a man and his dog, Bullet, but brings us back to those woods to see similar supernatural events unfold in a new light.

We spoke to developer Bloober Team (Observer, Layers of Fear) to better understand the direction of the project, why it felt like a good time to revisit the Blair Witch universe, and what we can expect from the upcoming title.

THE BIRTH OF THE WITCH

When *The Blair Witch Project* released to theaters in 1999, it quickly gained a cult following. Despite a low production budget of a mere $60,000, the film's massive success made it a box office hit, grossing more than $200 million worldwide and making it a pioneer of the found-footage subgenre (*Paranormal Activity*, *Cloverfield*). At the time, the world was largely operating without smartphones and only a sliver of the population owned camcorders, so seeing a movie play out through a fuzzy, home-camera resolution let viewers' imaginations run wild. This felt not just fresh, but terrifying when packaged into a horror film that toyed with our perception of reality. *The Blair Witch Project* made us fear what we can't see, and the video game hopes to have a similar effect.

With *The Blair Witch Project*'s 20th anniversary this year and Bloober's history with the interactive horror genre, it felt like a perfect fit for the license. "We are great at doing horror games, they are great at doing horror movies," says writer Barbara Kciuk. "We're just a good match, I would say. And personally, it was a great, great chance to work with this IP, because this is an IP that formed us as horror fans and horror-movie fans."

The Blair Witch franchise expands way beyond its late '90s debut film – there are comics, books, mockumentaries, and a trilogy of early 2000s video games – which gave Bloober Team an array of resources to work with. However, the developer wanted to create its own spin on the iconic story.

MISSING
PETER SHANNON

You play as an ex-cop named Ellis who helps search for a missing nine-year-old boy who disappeared under mysterious circumstances

BLAZING A NEW TRAIL

Blair Witch takes place in 1996 in the same place as the film, the Black Hills Forest in Burkittsville, Maryland, but much is different this time. You play as the impulsive ex-cop Ellis Lynch, who lends a hand in searching for a missing nine-year-old boy named Peter Shannon who disappeared in the woods. You get separated from the rest of the search party and end up falling victim yourself to the supernatural perils of the forest.

"[Attempting to find Peter] is the first driving force behind Ellis' actions," Kciuk says. "There are other characters connected with Ellis' backstory too, like Jess, his ex-wife, and the Sheriff [Emmett Lanning] who is the leader of the search party. They both care about Ellis in their own ways, and they will try to connect with him during this journey. They both play a really important part in his past and present."

Ellis holds a walkie-talkie as he navigates through the dark woods to stay in contact with the rest of the search party. This is one of the primary ways you interact with others, but just like the original film, the Blair Witch uses the voices of loved ones to toy with you and pull you toward traps.

Psychological horror is Bloober's specialty, and the team plans to expand those themes further in Blair Witch. Because of a more open environment in comparison to past games, they hope to instigate fear in new ways. Despite it all taking place in one forest, Bloober says that there will be a surprising amount of variety to the places you visit.

"I think what really ties us to the Blair Witch cinematic universe is the fact that we always love to mess with players' heads with an ever-changing environment," developer Maciek Glomb says. "And that's something that Blair Witch also did. It was both like space and environment, but also this idea of time loops. So, we want to give our take on that."

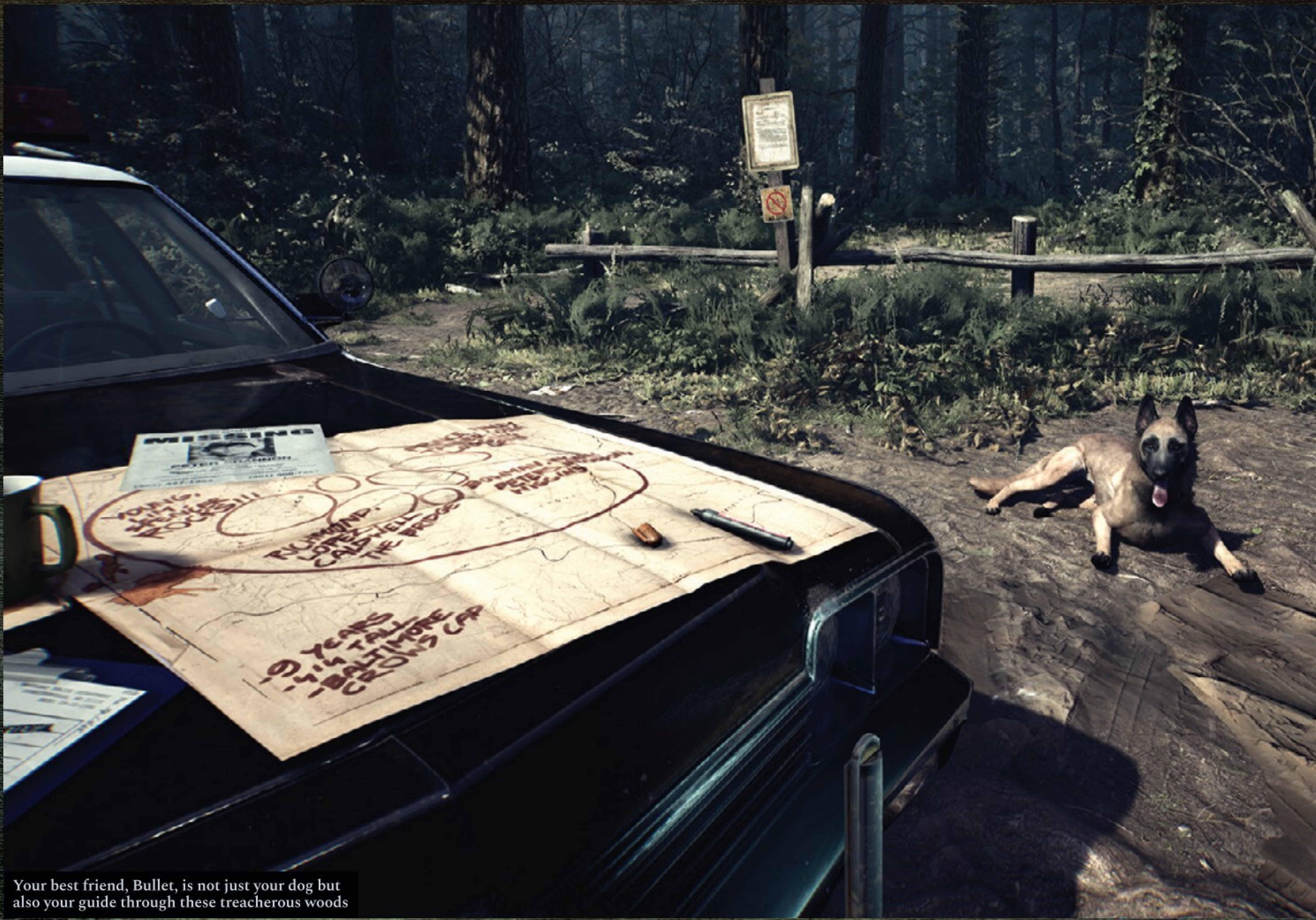
FEARING THE UNKNOWN

The Blair Witch Project spurred a lot of fan theories, with an ending that was open to interpretation. Without ever seeing the witch, some wondered if she even existed in the first place. Was this a supernatural nightmare or was this killing spree the result of one of the students descending into madness? Bloober Team brings their own interpretation to the game, and while they don't want to spoil anything, they said they view the witch not as one sole entity but as an "overpowering force."

"We don't really consider a witch like a traditional enemy," Kciuk says. "It's not something you can go against really, it's more of a force. This is not something you can encounter and fight with directly. She's there to really reshape the reality in such a way to make it more dangerous. And yes, this means that she will send some creatures after you."

Bloober Team introduces combat into one of its games for the first time, since you will be fighting against the witch's minions. Although Bloober remained tight-lipped on what exactly these foes look like, the team says you can fend them off with your one and only "weapon" – your flashlight. Rather than killing enemies, blinding them with light scares them off temporarily, meaning that you are safe for a limited time.

"You use the flashlight to fend off the creatures, at least some of them, because you also face enemies that will not [be] susceptible to the flashlight," Glomb says. "You will have to fight them or [use stealth to sneak past] them in different ways."

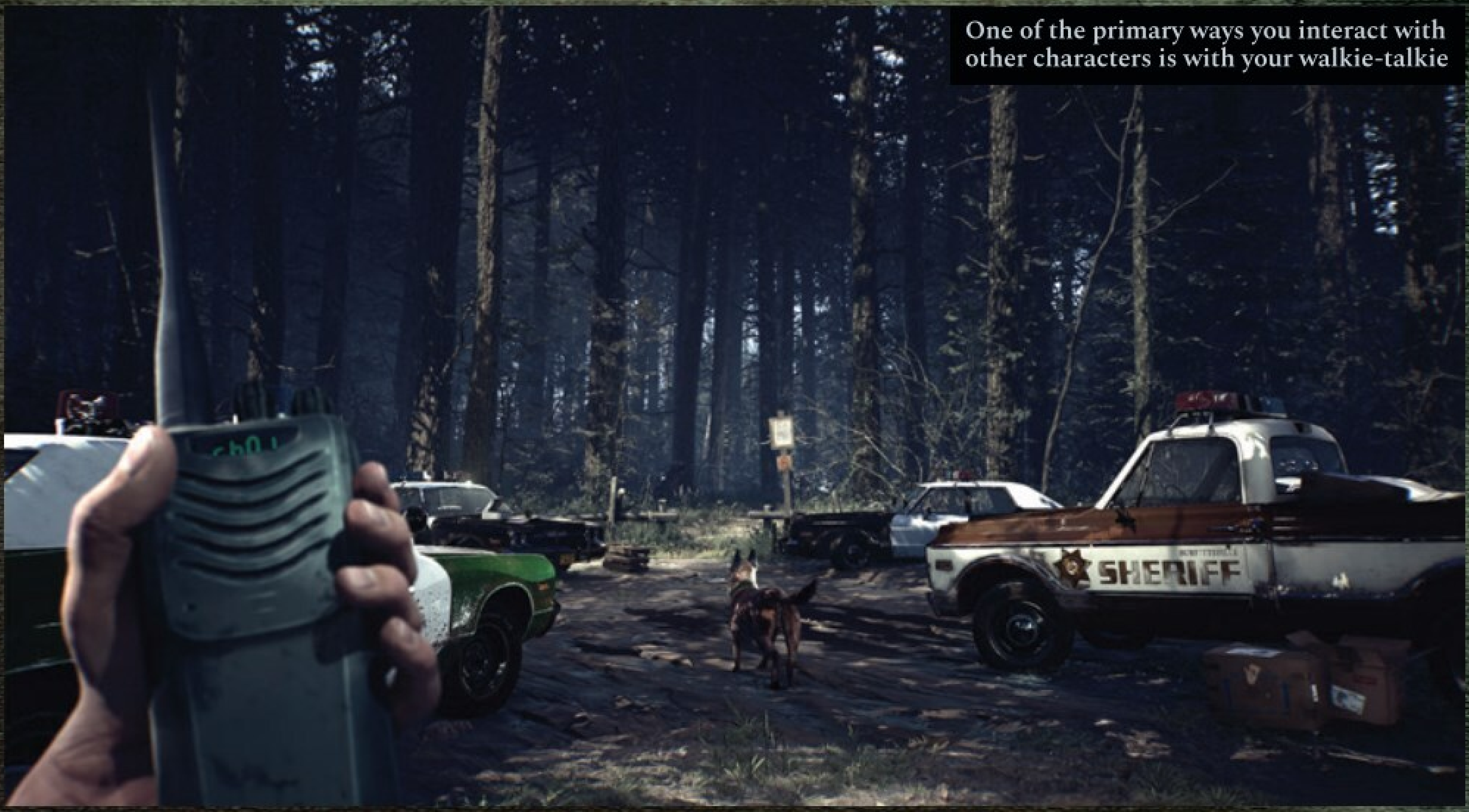


Your best friend, Bullet, is not just your dog but also your guide through these treacherous woods

After Layers of Fear and Observer, Bloober Team says fans expressed a desire for something different. While they enjoyed running from monsters, they wanted a way to defend themselves rather than be completely vulnerable in the presence of an enemy. Bloober believes the flashlight is a perfect compromise, giving players a way to fight back momentarily without losing that sense of dread.

"Combat is a good way to balance the exploration mechanics because you always need to think that if you go this or that direction, something bad may happen," Kciuk says. "This is a good way to make the pacing more tense, to always keep the player on edge."

Combat isn't the only gameplay Blair Witch offers. Along with your flashlight, you also carry a camcorder that can be used to solve puzzles. For example, you find tapes scattered around the world that can be inserted into your camera. By reviewing the footage, you will notice familiar landmarks. For example, rewinding the video of a tree falling can make that tree stand up again undamaged in real life too. This brings an added layer to exploration, where you have to keep a keen eye of your surroundings.



One of the primary ways you interact with other characters is with your walkie-talkie

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

While keeping an eye on details in the forest helps you solve puzzles, you also have a furry helper to guide you in the right direction. Bullet is Ellis' dog, who stays by your side throughout your journey, notifying you of nearby enemies and accessing areas you can't to grab noteworthy items and bring them back to you.

"You can ask for Bullet's help by giving him different commands," Kciuk says. "You can tell him what you need, and he will follow the commands you are giving him. But at the same time, he also has a mind of his own. He will try to help you even if you don't give him the commands. You are the brain, and he's the instinct. You need to cooperate with each other."

Bullet is still just a dog, and when I asked Bloober Team whether Bullet can alert enemies or be unhelpful in moments of conflict, they said, "It can happen."

"It all comes down to you know, what kind of Ellis you are and what kind of friend you are [to Bullet]," Glomb says. "Because when you are aware that monsters around you, you can basically tell Bullet to follow you or to stay close. If you forget about him completely, then yeah, there is a chance that he will alert them."

Your interactions with Bullet and how helpful he is with the task at hand depend on how strong your relationship is with him. Blair Witch has behind-the-scenes relationship mechanics that will change gameplay and story moments depending on how you treat Bullet. If you're wondering, yes, you can pet the dog. Your decisions go as far as even impacting Bullet's fate depending on what actions you choose.

"You can't just pet Bullet and he will forever be your friend," Kciuk says. "It's not that easy. But yeah, interacting with him is a very important part of the game."

SOLVING THE MYSTERY

One of the most fascinating parts of the Blair Witch franchise is the presence of a terrifying and invisible threat. With the original film and its many adaptations, a core theme that stays true to the series is leaving this mystery open for interpretation. Are the woods haunted? Are innocent victims dying at the hands of a witch or from something else entirely? While it sounds like Bloober Team believes in a supernatural force in this universe, we hope they still leave breadcrumbs and the final verdict up to the player in this new chapter. Only time will tell, and we're curious to see how it fares when it releases this August. ◆

The Outer Worlds

Exploring the fringes

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
Obsidian
Entertainment

» Release
October 25
(PS4, Xbox One, PC),
TBA (Switch)

The Outer Worlds is a sci-fi RPG that places you amid feuding corporate entities, untamed frontier colonies, and ferocious native beasts. The story takes you through all of these elements, but not necessarily in a prescribed order; player choice is a key component in The Outer Worlds, and the team at Obsidian aims to let you decide how you interact with the universe and the people in it. Though the main quest offers guidance, you have plenty of freedom to veer off the beaten path and make your own discoveries – which is exactly what I did when I spent a couple hours playing the game myself.

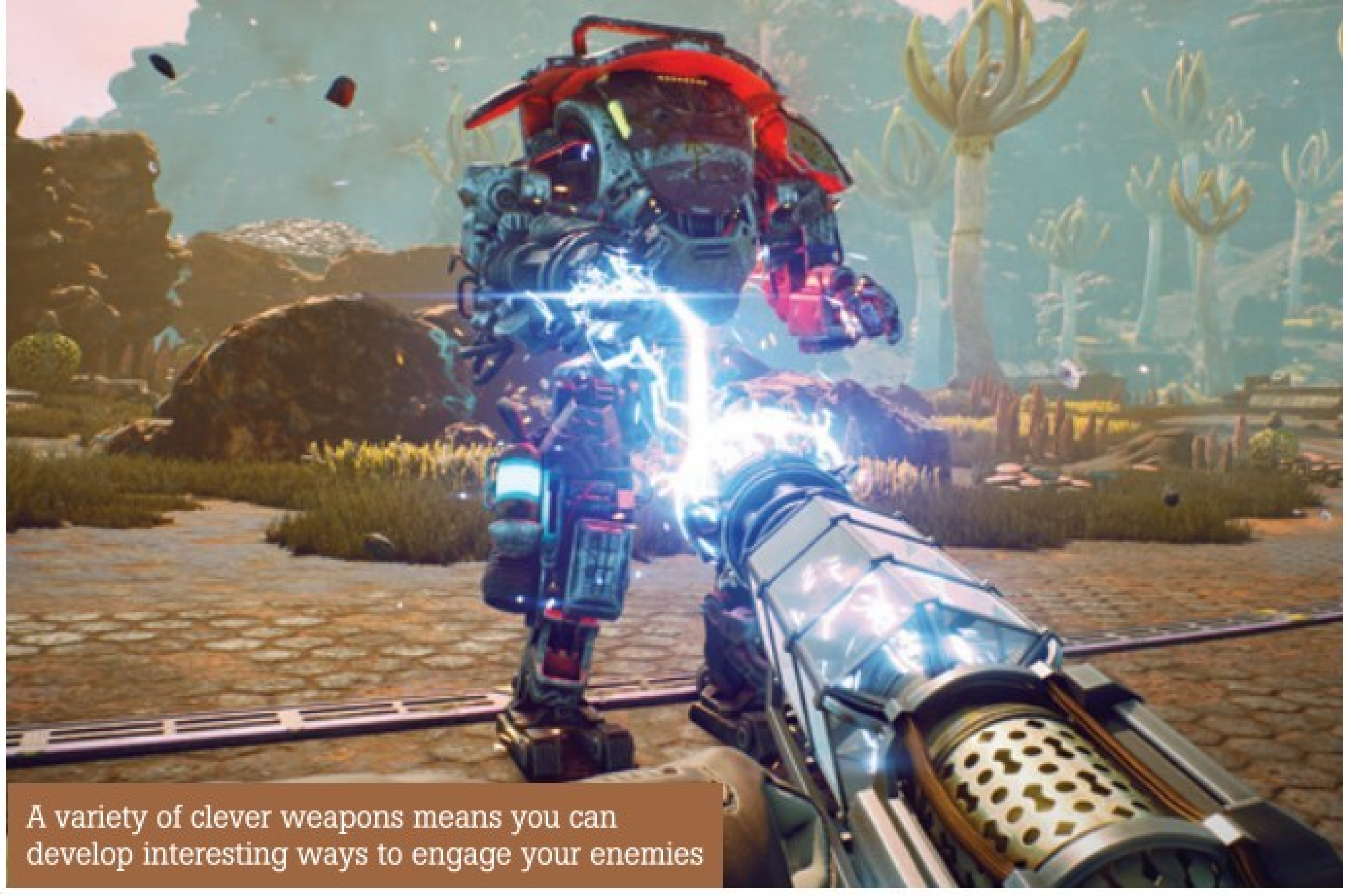
The demo begins on the planet Monarch, and I'm standing on the road to a settlement called Fallbrook. That is where the events of the E3 demo started, sending players on a quest to infiltrate a disturbing meat-production plant. But instead of treading that familiar ground, I set off in a different direction to see what else Monarch has to offer.

Almost immediately, I learn that one thing Monarch offers is a bunch of monsters. I encounter a group of mantisaurs, and since I wasn't being especially cautious, they are alerted to my presence. My pre-made character is more skilled with firearms than melee, so I try to keep my distance as they swarm me and my two companions. My allies deal most of the damage, and with a press of the d-pad I activate their special attacks – powerful cinematic moves that operate on cooldowns. Nyoka uses a heavy machinegun to pepper a mantisaur with bullets, while Parvati goes in for a smash with an electrified hammer. I finish the final foe using tactical time dilation (TTD), slowing down everything around me to line up a clear shot at the weak spot at the base of its body.

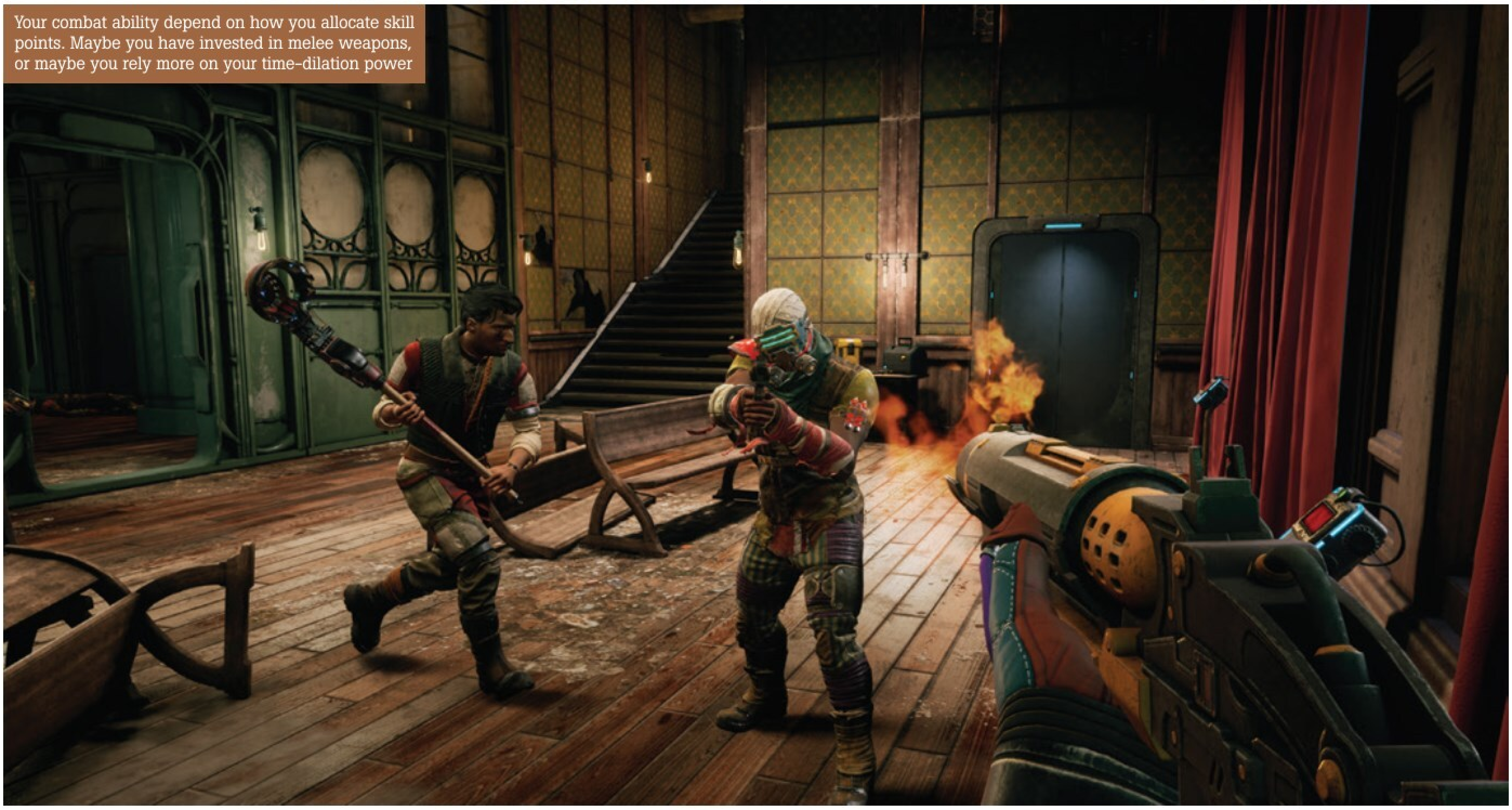
The controls feel responsive and intuitive, even with a wide variety of options at your disposal. How a battle unfolds depends heavily on the skills and perks you have assigned, so if my character had more points in strength-related attributes, I might have run in to perform charged attacks with my poison-imbued sword. If you love the V.A.T.S. system in the Fallout series, you should consider investing in TTD-related perks to give combat a more tactical edge – though the shooting mechanics still feel solid if you prefer a more action-oriented approach. The enemies don't go down easily, but they don't feel like bullet sponges, either.

After wandering through the alien wilderness for a while, I reach a settlement called Amber Heights. This place is home to the Iconoclasts, a religious group and one of Monarch's major factions. It's led by Graham, a zealous man preaching about "Philosophism." But to spread the word, he needs help getting a printing press up and running, so I take on the job.

I leave Amber Heights in search of Carlotta, the supplier who can provide the printing press rollers Graham needs. The problem is she's locked herself in a warehouse surrounded by goons who want her dead. I'm met by a guy named Niles, who gives a flimsy "we're fixing a leaky generator" excuse for why I can't approach the warehouse. Through



A variety of clever weapons means you can develop interesting ways to engage your enemies



Your combat ability depend on how you allocate skill points. Maybe you have invested in melee weapons, or maybe you rely more on your time-dilation power

the course of our conversation, I see several paths to my goal; I could bribe Niles to go away, I could persuade him to let me kill Carlotta for him (after getting what I need from her), or I could just attack Niles and his cronies to clear the way. Instead of those options, I just lie to Niles (my character is good at lying, otherwise that line would be grayed out), telling him I'm there to investigate a mantiswarm infestation. Niles gets spooked and runs off, and I go inside to get the printing press rollers from Carlotta.

Graham is happy to have the parts, and he gives me another quest to rendezvous with his people and repair the press. Unfortunately, my time is limited and I have other things to see, so I decide to burn my bridges: I open fire on Graham and his compatriots, clearing out their compound. Killing NPCs like the Iconoclasts may close off their questlines, but it also has ripples that are harder to predict. "You may not have interacted with the other factions in the world, but they're going to have some views on [killing Graham]," says senior producer Matthew Singh. "Depending on the story you want, that may have helped you in a lot of ways. Now, when you come to another faction that doesn't see eye-to-eye with Graham and the Iconoclasts, they could be like 'Oh, great! You murdered those guys and solved my problem already. I love you!' Maybe that's good for you, maybe it's not."

I turn to my companions for a clue on where to go next, and the hunter Nyoka asks me if I can do her a personal favor. She has some old friends she wants to track down – a multi-stage journey that would take me to other worlds. I also run into a group of mercenaries standing outside a dangerous cave, waiting for their employer to return – but I attack them before I could see that thread through to its conclusion, so the quest goes into the "botched" section of my journal. I rack up several optional tasks like these in my quest log, but none of them are part of the main story. Obsidian is happy to let players find their own path, hoping all the little hooks along the way pull players into the larger adventure. "If you are going through and exploring the world, you're finding things that hopefully help explain how this world functions," Singh says. "That should give you some kind of motivation to go seek out things, learn more about it, and then by doing that you learn more about what the major conflicts are – and hopefully you'll be engaged from there. But it's definitely a balancing act; we want people to be able to explore while still wanting to engage with the characters."

The biggest payoffs in The Outer Worlds happen over time, like seeing the long-term consequences of your actions, and experiencing the gradual growth of your character's abilities. However, even during the brief time I spent on Monarch, I was immersed from one moment to the next. The combat feels dynamic, the writing has an amusing streak of dark humor, and the landscape is full of dangers and rewards. Whether you want to wreak havoc or make friends, The Outer Worlds is full of possibilities. » **Joe Juba**

Gears 5

Appealing to newcomers and veterans alike

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
The Coalition

» Release
September 10

Ever since its introduction in 2006, the Gears of War franchise has emphasized an in-your-face attitude few other competitive shooters carry with them. Whether you're popping heads with a sniper rifle or literally chainsawing your opponent in half, Gears of War's competitive multiplayer offerings have always catered toward the more aggressive play styles. For this reason, the online versus modes have sometimes been unwelcoming to newcomers. The Coalition wants to change that, but at the same time double down on its hardcore community.

Encouraging newcomers to jump into the fiery gauntlet of competitive multiplayer can be tough for an established series like Gears of War. However, with the introduction of a hero-based mode, The Coalition gives players a breezy and approachable experience that relies on strategy and ingenuity nearly as much as it does skill. In the spirit of attracting a more casual audience, The Coalition has coined this mode "Arcade."

In Arcade, players choose from a stable of characters with unique abilities, loadouts, and upgrade trees. At launch, you can choose from Drone, Grenadier, Hunter, Sniper, and Scion on the Swarm side, while COGs can choose from Kait, Del, JD, Marcus, and Fahz. Every time you get a kill or assist, you earn a skull, which can be used to purchase upgrades mid-match. While skulls carry over from life to life, the upgrades you purchase go away if you die.

While choosing the right character with the loadout that suits your play style is important, the biggest swings during the matches I played happened with effective use of the upgrade system. In one instance, I was stranded behind enemy lines with three opponents quickly closing in on me. I took shelter behind one of the series' trademark waist-high walls, but they were onto me, and it was only a matter of time before they would close the gap and blow my head off. I equipped my Gnasher shotgun, hoping to just take one of them with

Cosmetic Superiority

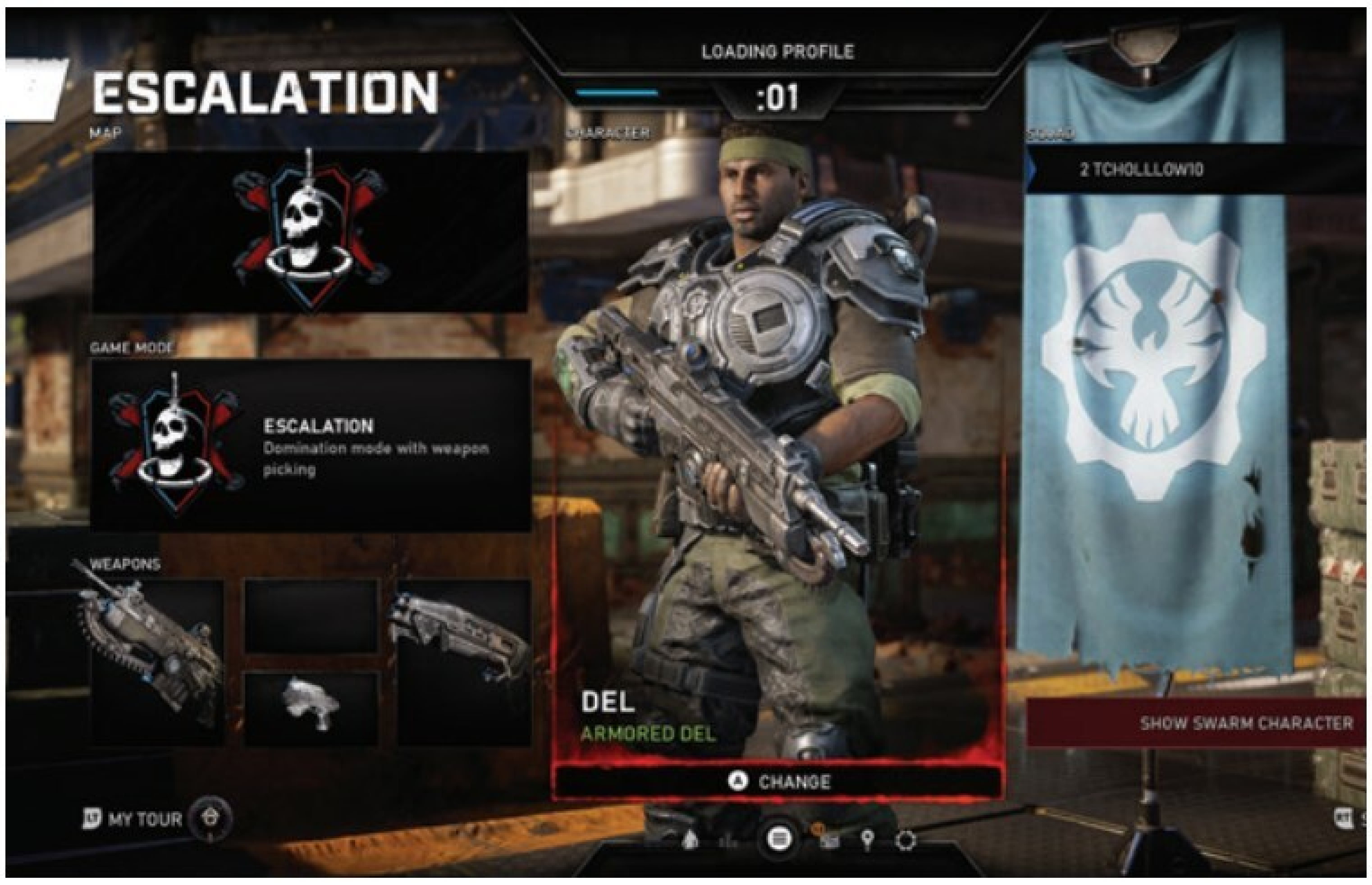
The Coalition is changing how it approaches post-release content. Gears 5 plans on delivering a substantial amount of content both at launch and for a long time after. While multiplayer maps are given to all players for free, cosmetic content can either be earned through in-game objectives or time spent playing, with an exclusive set of cosmetic content available to purchase in the store.

Additionally, since they add new gameplay, post-launch hero characters can either be earned or purchased. Once you obtain a new hero character, you can use them and their unique abilities in Horde, Escape, and Arcade.

In response to fan feedback, Gears 5 removes all lootbox-based elements, with the only random rewards being given out through the time-played rewards. For everything else you earn or purchase, you know exactly what you're getting.

Here is the kind of cosmetic content players can expect to see in Gears 5.

- Weapon Skins – Change the look of your weapon
- Character Skins – Change the look of your character
- Mark Icons – A custom symbol that appears to your team over the head of an enemy you spot and call out
- Executions – Combine weapon-specific executions with other weapons. Ever wonder what the Dropshot execution looks like when done with a Lancer?
- Bloodsprays – From smiley faces to sayings, these sprays appear on the ground to tell everyone that you executed an enemy in that spot
- Expressions – Emotes you can apply to a character so they do an animation and voice line. Some are animation only, some are voice only



me, but noticed I had a pile of skulls to use, so I quickly pressed the Y button to show the upgrade menu. Then, with a single press of the d-pad, I acquired and equipped a powerful RL-4 Salvo rocket launcher. I emerged from cover with the hulking launcher and blew all three enemies to bits. Moments like that, where the complexion of a situation can be altered with the unique systems, are what make Arcade mode feel distinct and special.

Casual players aren't the only ones jumping into Gears 5, as the series has a dedicated following of players who have been honing their skills since the first game. While attempting to court a more casual fan base may seem like it will inevitably alienate the hardcore players, The Coalition has other plans for its most skilled competitors. Starting with big changes to its esports-focused Escalation mode, which was introduced in Gears of War 4, and extending to a skill-based recoil system that makes the Lancer and other rifles more viable in top-tier play, the competitive suite looks to cater to the series' die-hard audience like never before.

In the first iteration of domination-based Escalation, players respawned based on a timer that increased each round. In Gears 5, that system is turned upside down. Instead of automatically respawning, players are given a limited number of respawns during the entire match. That means if a round is close and you die, you can choose to consume one of your respawns to return to the action and hopefully secure the round for your team. However, if it's a blowout one way or the other, you can preserve your respawns and either rest on your team's laurels or live to fight another day depending on the situation.

According to Gears 5 multiplayer design director Ryan Cleven, Escalation isn't built for new players to jump right into, but rather a potential final destination for Gears 5 versus players. "If you imagine a ladder or a pyramid, [Escalation] definitely is the top end for skill in the game," he says. "What we want to do is take you on a journey from never having seen Gears of War before, expose you to the basics, build your skillset up, and allow you to express that in Escalation."

While Arcade and Escalation were the emphasis of my hands-on time with Gears 5's multiplayer, many traditional Gears of War modes also return. In the pre-release build I played, I saw options for Arms Race, Dodgeball, Execution, Guardian, King of the Hill, Team Deathmatch, and Warzone.

Gears 5 represents the biggest and most diverse collection of multiplayer modes in the history of the franchise. We don't have to wait long to see how The Coalition fares with its ambitious endeavors, as Gears 5 hits next month. » **Brian Shea**

Remnant: From The Ashes

Further exploration of a unique apocalypse

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(3-Player Online)

» Publisher
Perfect World

» Developer
Gunfire Games

» Release
August 20

In 2016, developer Gunfire Games released an Oculus Quest exclusive launch title called Chronos. The quick pitch for Chronos is that it merged gameplay sensibilities from Zelda and Dark Souls into a novel third-person action game with a unique premise. A labyrinth exists in a post-apocalyptic world that holds secrets crucial to humanity's salvation, but it only opens once a year. If the player fails to solve the labyrinth, they are ejected and return a year later to try and solve it once again. Each failed attempt adds a year to your life, affecting your stats.

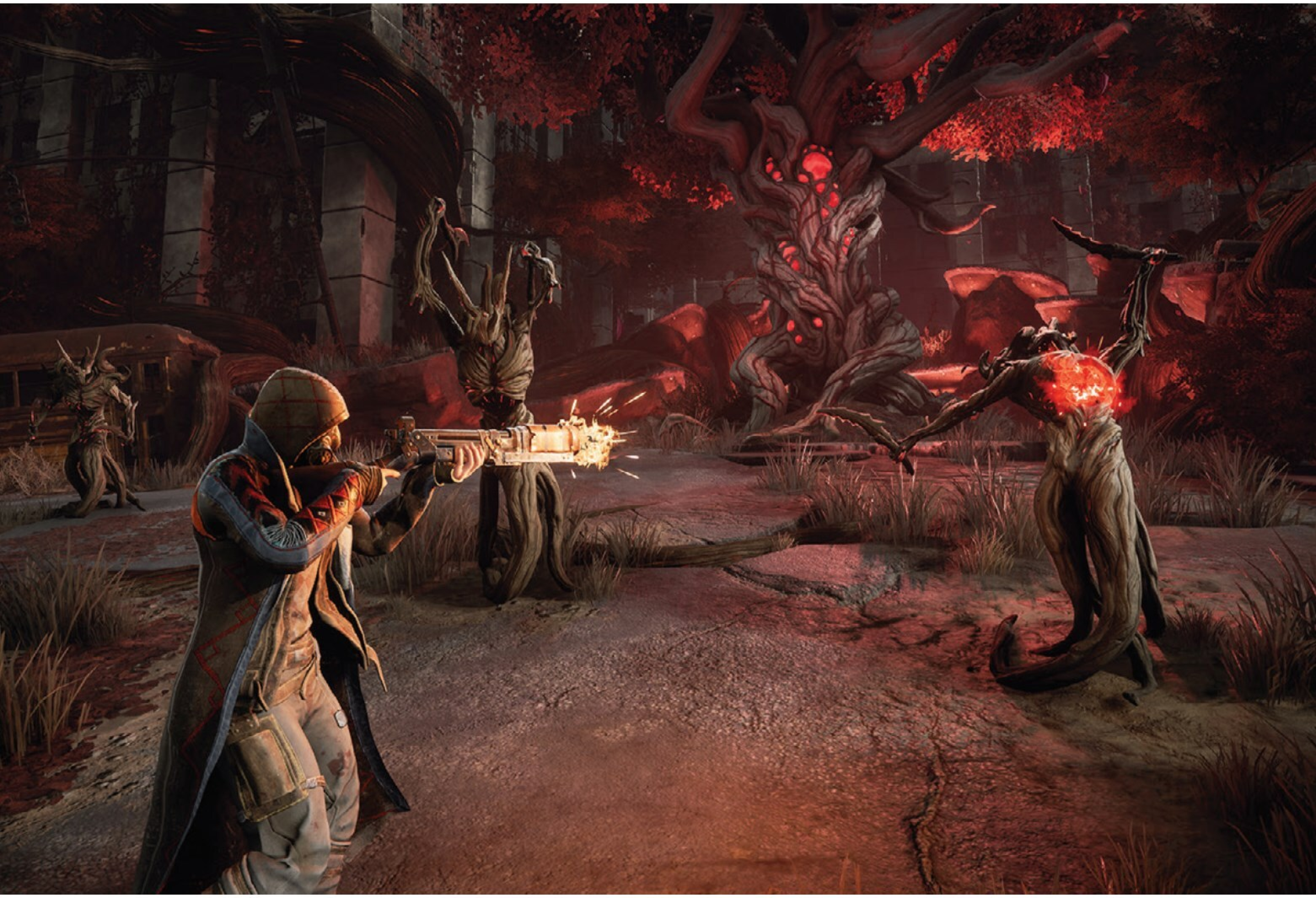
Remnant: From the Ashes is not a sequel, but takes place in the same universe and picks up where Chronos left off. "We loved the world we created so much in Chronos that we thought it would be fun to revisit that and see how the rest of the world lives," design director and Gunfire co-founder John Pearl says. "You never really saw survivors or interacted with other humans and we thought, 'Well ... there have to be other survivors out there, right?'"

In the late 1960s, an evil appeared on Earth in the form of the Root. It pushed the world into ruin and, as the title hints, it's up to you to lift the world from the ashes and restore the remnants that persist. Remnant begins about 80 years after the apocalypse and drops you in a world ravaged by the Root, which takes the form of tree-like monsters and creatures.

The world you explore is uniquely your own, as the layout is randomized when you start the game. Pearl refers to that element as a sort of chaperoned randomness. The levels, enemy placement, and items do not shift and change when you die. They always have the same layout and you hit the same story moments and bosses as others playing the game, but everyone's layout and the order of events will differ from one another. It also allows everything to shift when you start a new playthrough. "There is something really cool about not knowing what's next or what's around the corner," Pearl says. "What if you played the same area, but had different experiences, and then you could compare those experiences? There is something really compelling about that."

Level randomization typically assumes roguelite mechanics that punish the player with starting over when they die, but that's not the case here. Your character and unlocks persist through death. There are punishments for dying, which are not yet fully clear, but the traits you unlock, the weapons you find and craft, and the story progress you make all remain.

In the same way Chronos was primarily a mix of Zelda and Dark Souls mechanics, Remnant is similarly a mash-up combining the gunplay of living shooters like Destiny and The Division with mechanics from Dark



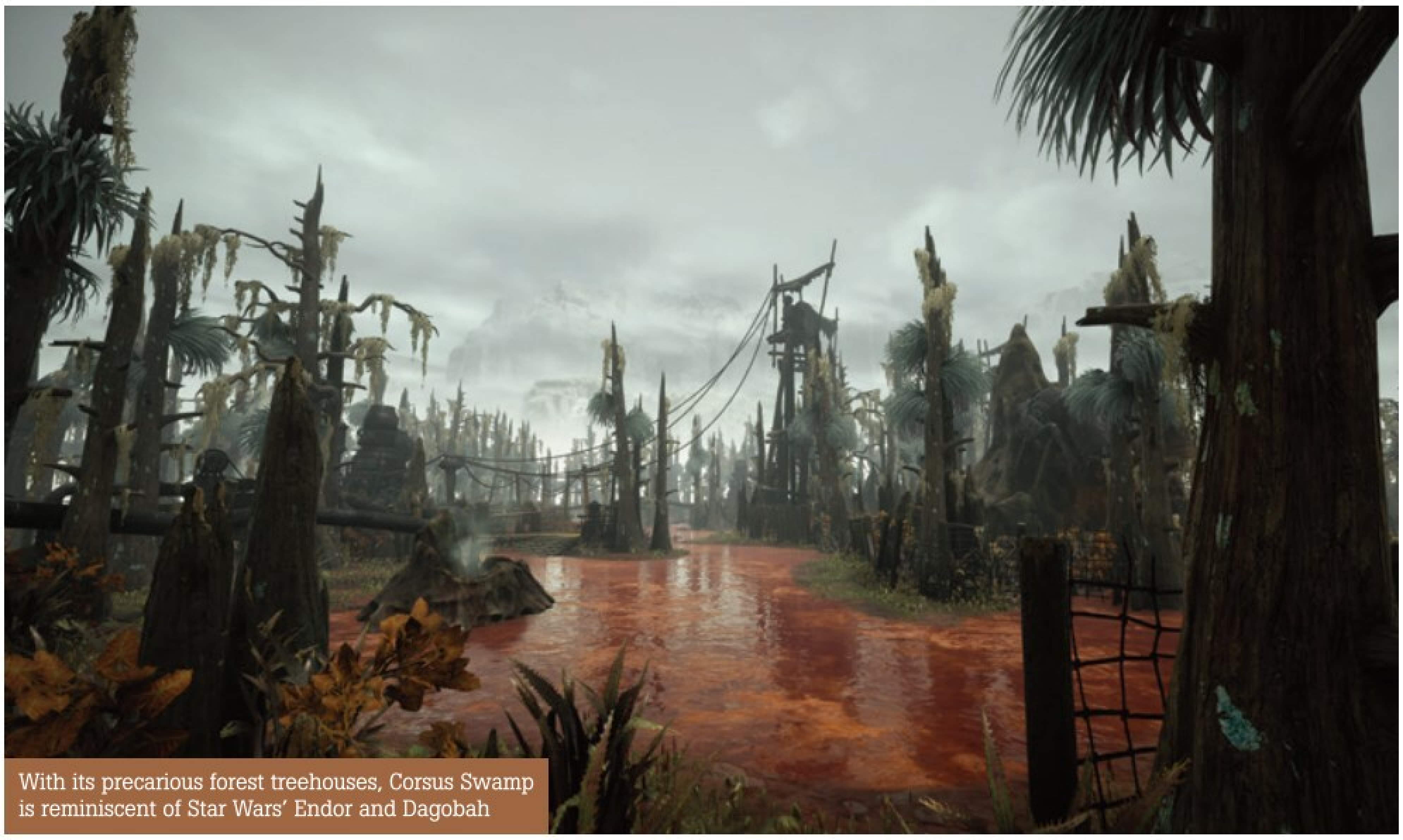
Souls. The shooting action is in third-person, fog gates mark boss confrontations, and checkpoints are functionally similar to Dark Souls' bonfires, resetting the world and enemies around you while restoring your health items and ammunition. You also unlock shortcuts for quicker routes back to checkpoints as you progress.

In our hands-on, we venture though a variety of surprisingly distinct locations, each with their own specific enemy types. We start in a dilapidated, overgrown city that wouldn't look out of place in Gunfire's last game, Darksiders 3, but we also travel to the Rhom Wasteland and find a desert filled with violent humans and an underground, futuristic facility called The Clean Room that apparently nuked the surface above in an attempt to push back against the Root and incidentally doomed themselves. We fight Satyr-like enemies in the Yaesha Jungle, which Pearl says is a location that also appeared in Chronos, and explore a submerged swamp.

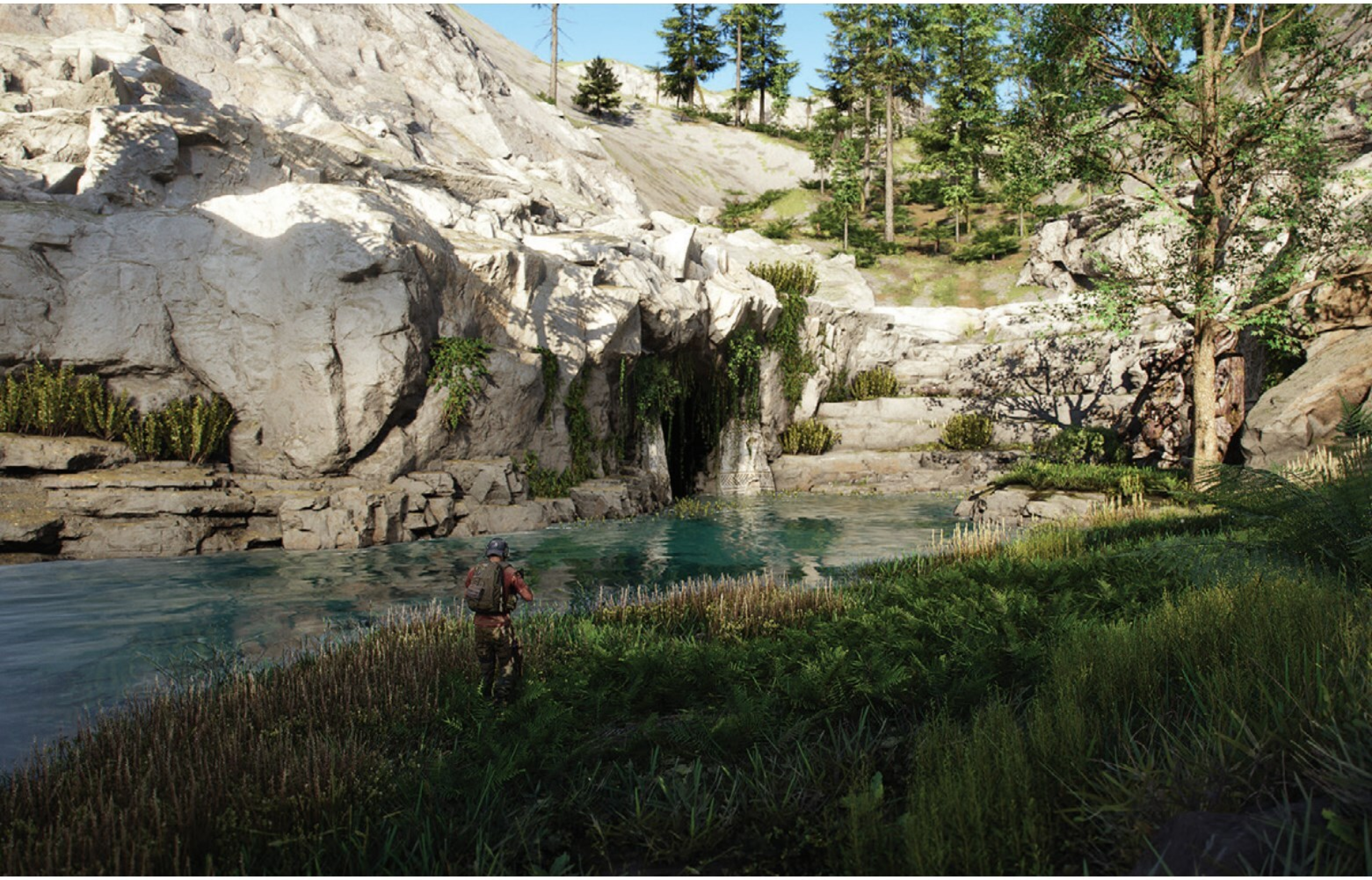
The Fetid Glade area of the Corsus Swamp looks like a combination of Star Wars' Endor and Dagobah, with precarious treehouses reaching into the sky above the swampy marsh. The enemies of this area, called the Iskal, have multiple arms pockmarked with yellow boils, and even with two other players on hand, we struggle against their onslaught as we remove their limbs with gunfire.

We jump ahead to a few other areas to experience some of the game's bosses, of which Pearl says there are around a dozen. The Totem Father is a giant, red-faced ape who leaps onto pillars to attack from above. The Ravager is a gigantic wolf with multiple front paws who leaps in and out of the battle arena to return with various riders on its back. Pearl says all of the bosses can be defeated in multiple ways to earn different types of crafting materials. One of the ways the wolf boss can be defeated involves no combat at all: If you follow the correct order of events, you can meet the wolf and simply talk to him to receive his materials without firing a bullet. Pearl says not all the bosses can be "defeated" in this way, but they all have more than one win scenario to earn their rewards.

Gunfire Games has quietly been on a development tear, releasing multiple VR games, remastering Darksiders 2, and releasing Darksiders 3 following its founding in 2014. Remnant is Gunfire's opportunity to present its original world to larger platforms, and our time playing the game cooperatively (and seeing how it can be played as a single-player shooter) inspires confidence. The apocalypse has been done to death in video games, but after getting an enjoyable peek in Chronos and seeing more here, we're hopeful Gunfire's take can offer something new. » **Kyle Hilliard**



With its precarious forest treehouses, Corsus Swamp is reminiscent of Star Wars' Endor and Dagobah



Ghost Recon Breakpoint

Welcome to Adventure Island

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

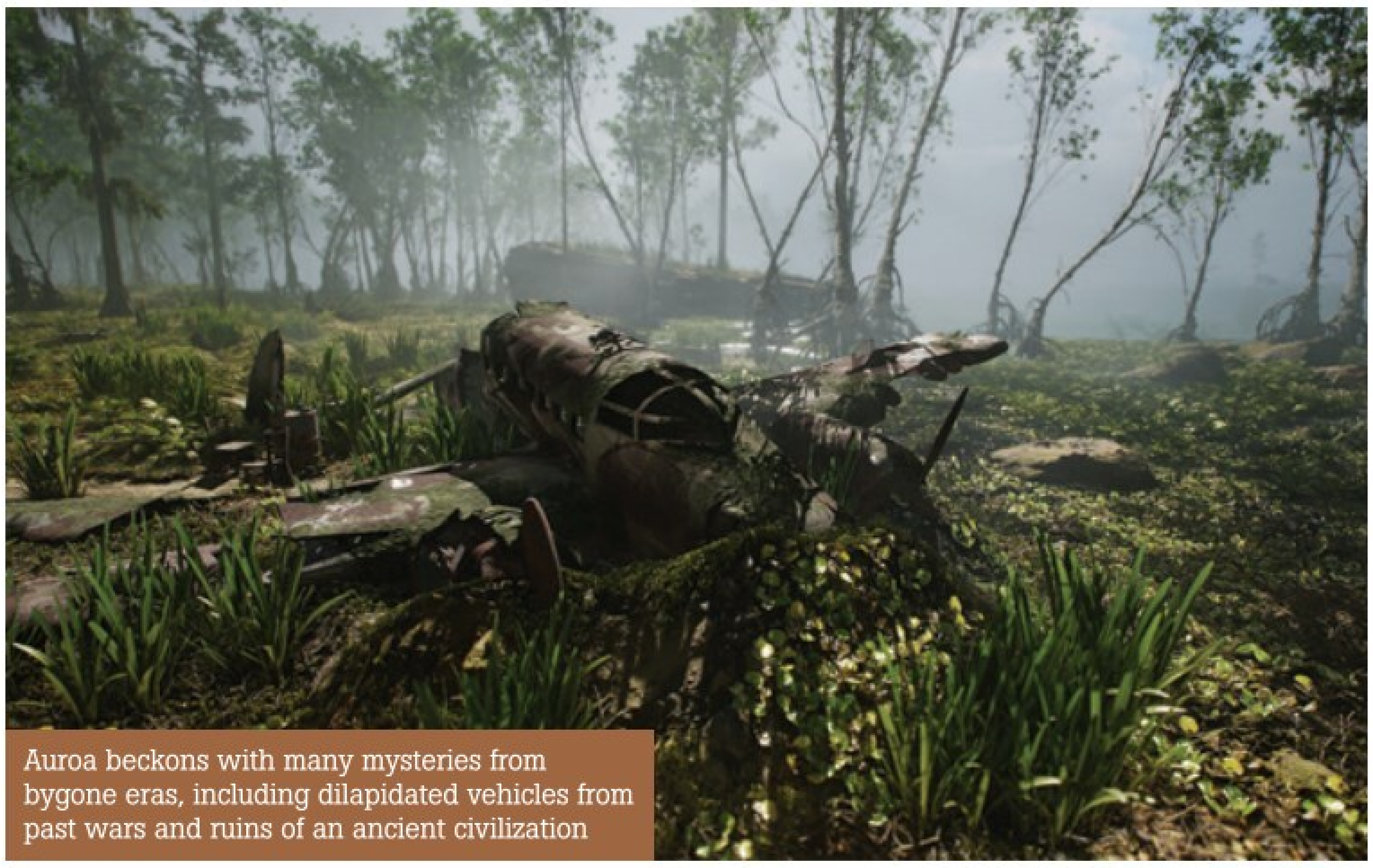
» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Paris

» Release
October 4

Ubisoft threw longtime Ghost Recon fans a major curveball when it announced the latest game in the series isn't set in a real-world country. Instead of heading to the latest region embroiled in a global showdown, Ghost Recon Breakpoint transports players to Auroa, a fictitious archipelago. The decision wasn't made lightly, but Ubisoft is confident its new playground will feel just as alive and realistic as its predecessor.

Creating its own setting solved one of the major problems developer Ubisoft Paris faced when transitioning from Wildlands to Breakpoint: finding another location on earth with the gorgeous scenery and diverse biomes that made Bolivia such a standout setting. "We were quite happy with this idea of completely controlling the design of the game, including the landscape, and not just sticking to reality and trying to recreate existing vistas," says lead artist and technical art director Benoit Martinez.



Auroa beckons with many mysteries from bygone eras, including dilapidated vehicles from past wars and ruins of an ancient civilization

Building Auroa from scratch allowed Martinez and his team to pick and choose the geographic elements of the archipelago, and the results are stunning. Players can expect to traverse snowy mountains, sweeping grasslands, salt marshes, and fiordland with waterfalls descending into the rivers. Each biome has its own distinct flora and fauna, which can be harvested for crafting purposes. These regions come to life thanks to the improved technology developed by Ubisoft Paris, including a new lighting system, new weather mechanics, and denser vegetation.

Deep networks of caves and subterranean tunnels run throughout the archipelago

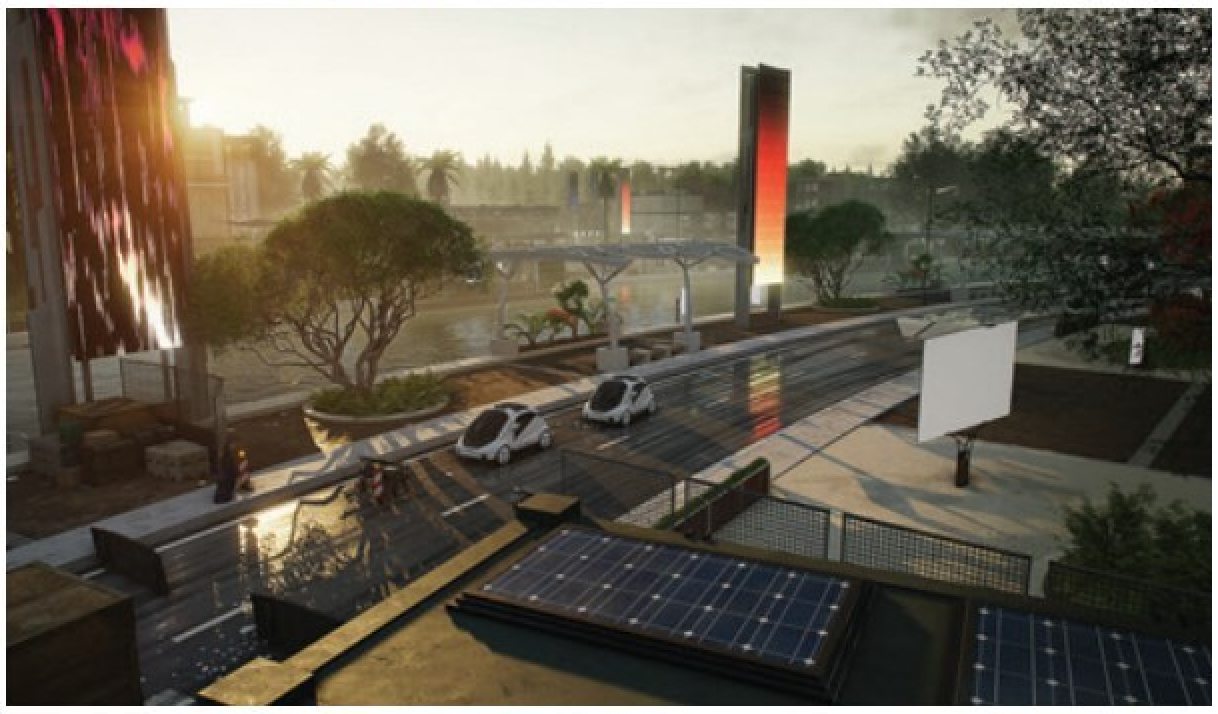
The natural landscape may steal the show, but Ubisoft also put in work to make Auroa feel like it has been inhabited for years. Skell Technology has taken over the island and littered it with state-of-the-art sites, but the island has a rich history that includes ruins from an ancient civilization called the Forgotten, dilapidated Cold War facilities used by the United States during the height of its tensions with the Soviet Union, and small villages inhabited by islanders who have called Auroa home for decades.

Touring the islands, Ubisoft clearly did its homework to make this place feel real. The large, high-tech research facilities may look like something out of a near-future sci-fi show, but everything that's necessary to make Auroa a self-sustaining entity is visible as well. Drones harvest the farmlands, waste facilities clean up after the population, industrial sites gather the necessary materials for the drone constructions, and Silicon Valley-style dwellings house the talented engineers and scientists who call the archipelago home.

Don't expect to see those citizens cruising around, however. The island is on lockdown due to security threats, and the private military contractors providing overwatch don't let the population roam free. They are essentially indentured servants by the time the Ghosts arrive, so any vehicles or humans you see in the wilderness are likely armed and dangerous. Security checkpoints and drone patrols ensure the Ghosts won't be taking too many carefree joyrides through Auroa. Based on our early play sessions, pacing of the action feels much tighter than Wildlands; threats are around every corner.

Though I was initially disappointed by Ghost Recon Breakpoint veering into a fictional setting, after my fly-by, Auroa has me intrigued. I'm curious what secrets those archeological sites and Cold War bunkers may hold, and eager to explore the rest of the gorgeous island as well. » **Matt Bertz**

The futuristic city of Liberty rests in the heart of Auroa



Monster Hunter World: Iceborne

New and familiar faces

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Capcom

» Release
September 6 (Console),
Winter (PC)

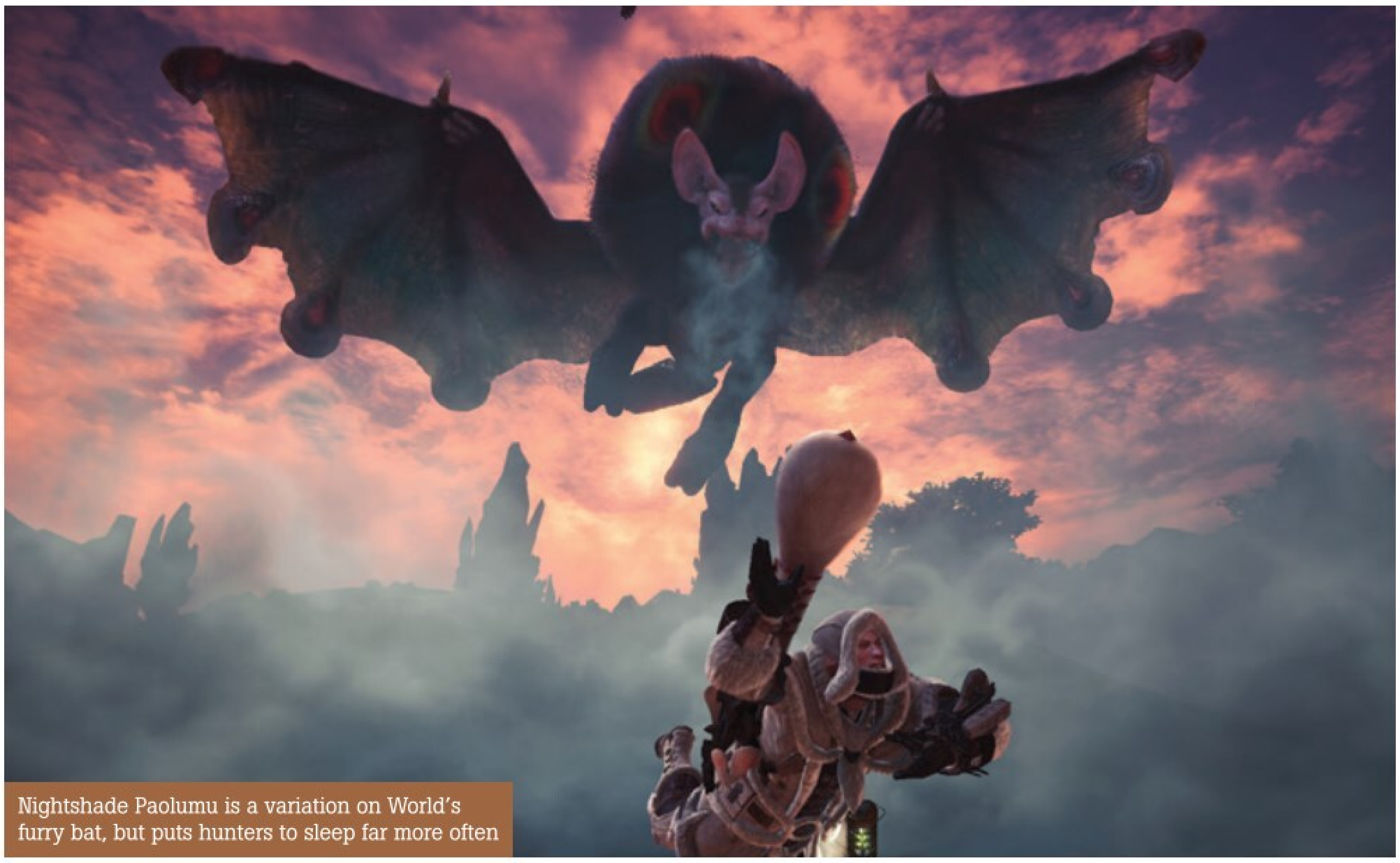
Even after many years of enjoying Monster Hunter as a series, there is still a sense of awe I get from moments in the game. The introduction of a new monster, incensed by this armored human flagrantly traipsing into its land, is a stern reminder that I am still a tiny speck that is somehow surmounting this giant behemoth that could easily flatten me. Throughout my time playing through Monster Hunter World: Iceborne's first few hours, I was struck by how well the expansion managed to renew that same sense of wonder with every new monster and variation.

The story picks up shortly after World itself ends, with your hunter and the Handler exploring some strange goings-on within the Ancient Forest. After witnessing a new Elder Dragon making trouble over the open waters, the fleet decides to make base in Seliana, and fully investigate this new frozen-over area. Nearly every quest, at least in Iceborne's opening hours, has cutscenes both beginning and ending it, meaning there is a lot of story packed into the comparatively tighter expansion.

While Iceborne has new monsters, we did come across a number of variations on Monster Hunter World's familiar beasts. In one expedition, I fell into a cave and landed next to an elongated brown monster with a familiar shape. The poison-fanged beast was revealed to be Viper Tobi-Kadachi, a new version of World's electric squirrel-snake with a focus on forcing you to use as many antidotes as possible. Unlike the original, the Viper version has little compunction about using its tail to swipe at you as soon as you get within range, forcing you to back off and lick your wounds.

Another divergent evolution, who seemingly has roots in Iceborne's overarching story, is the Nightshade Paolumu, a darker and more aggressive version of the fuzzy bat. As the original Paolumu was not a monster worthy of much fear, I failed to take its Nightshade remodel seriously, which I regretted as soon as it quickly put me to sleep and proceeded to finish me off while I was helpless. Shortly after is a Coral Pukei-Pukei, which lives in the Coral Highlands and shoots a high-pressure water stream out of its tail to cut hunters down.

While old monsters with tweaks are not as exciting as entirely new ones, they do provide variety to a base game that needed some. Fighting a new version of a Tobi-Kadachi or Pukei-Pukei that keeps me on my toes will make those hours of grinding new equipment out of monster parts so much more interesting for those looking to play more Monster Hunter World. » **Imran Khan**



Nightshade Paolumu is a variation on World's furry bat, but puts hunters to sleep far more often

The Dark Pictures: Man Of Medan

The beginnings of a horror nightmare

When Supermassive Games released Until Dawn on PlayStation 4 in 2015, it did not expect the game would be so universally praised. The developer, now working on Man of Medan, admits it anticipated Until Dawn would be rather divisive, with players being split on the narrative horror game. Once it got positive feedback, however, Supermassive's team became emboldened to pursue the idea to even greater lengths with The Dark Pictures anthology.

As the first game in what is intended to be a multi-part compendium of unrelated horror narratives, Man of Medan explores the mystery of a military battleship and the unlucky seafarers who come across it. The story begins in China shortly after World War II, where the U.S. military has brought several non-descript crates on board a ship, not noticing that they bleed an oozing phantom red goo onto the ground. Two soldiers, Joe and Charlie, get in a drunken scuffle on the ship's deck and are consequently knocked unconscious and locked in the brig. When they awaken, they have more than just an angry superior waiting for them.

As the two soldiers explore the interior of the warship, they quickly find that every soul onboard has met with a grisly fate. It is not long until they, too, meet the same ends, being killed in a variety of different ways depending on the player's choices. In our demo, Joe was stabbed through the heart by a child ghoul, but another playthrough showed Joe equipped with a gun and ultimately being scared to death by the same child hiding inside of a locker.

With the addition of online multiplayer, the two soldiers are able to move independently of each other, and even die independently of each other. One player can help another escape the brig or see ghosts run in front of the camera that the other player cannot see.

This dynamic carries through to the main story, following a group of divers looking for sunken treasure. Two brothers, Alex and Brad, have calculated that there is a crashed fighter plane in the bottom of the ocean with possible treasure, an idea that their contracted captain is vehemently against. Felicité DuBois, nicknamed Fliss, insists that disturbing the plane runs afoul of both the law and the dead, something the group ignores. Alex's girlfriend Julia and her brother Conrad, played by X-Men and Quantum Break star Shawn Ashmore, mostly just see dollar signs.

Like every good horror movie, it is not long before things go sideways, and their motorboat slams into the military battleship. While our demo did not go further, it is a promising start to what could be a fascinating horror mashup. We are eager to see how Man of Medan's cast gets out of their situation, if they do at all, or if they're doomed to the same fate as the rest of the ship.
» **Imran Khan**

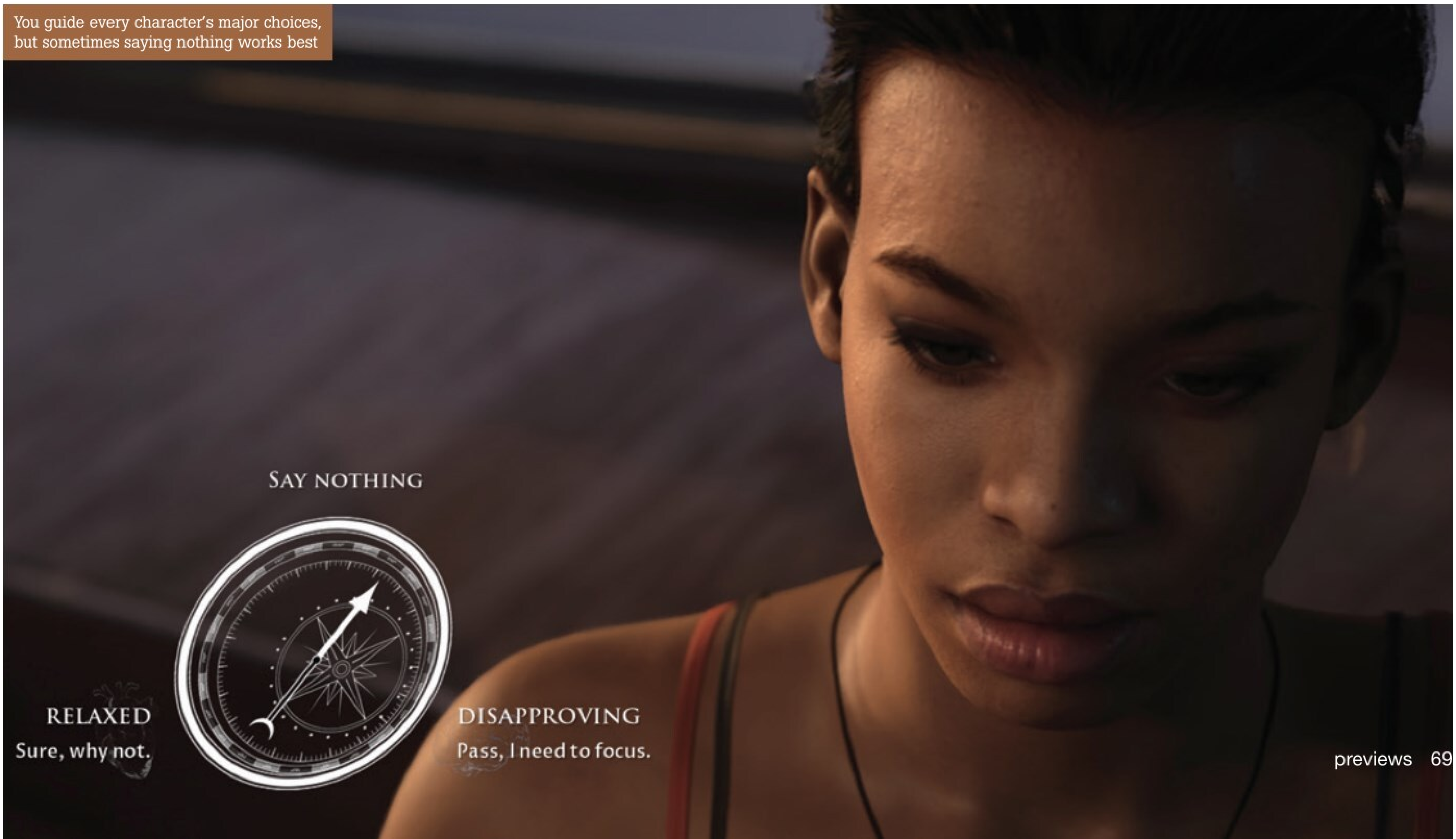
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 5-Player Adventure
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Supermassive Games

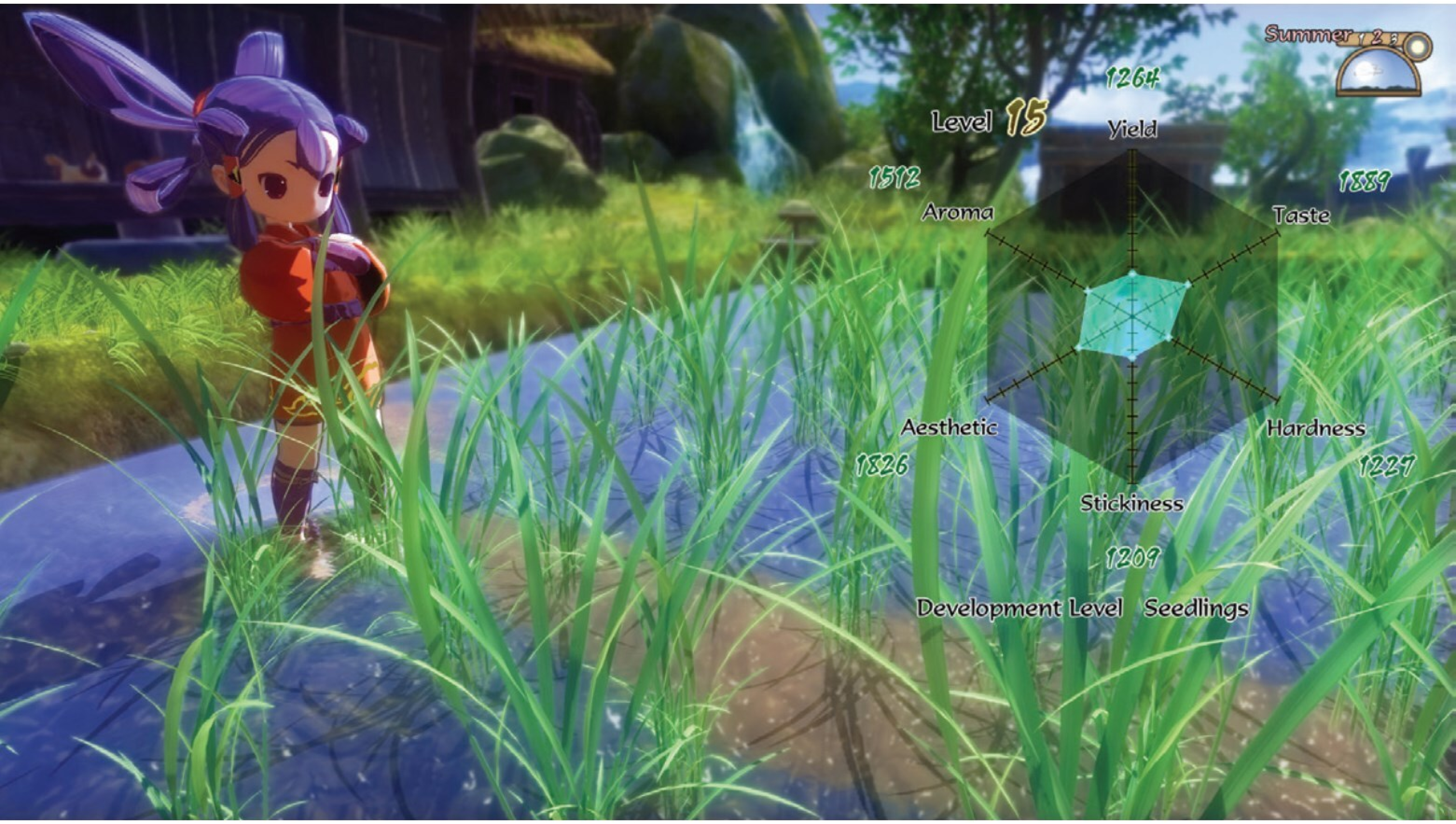
» **Release**
August 30



You guide every character's major choices, but sometimes saying nothing works best

Sakuna: Of Rice And Ruin

Swords into plowshares



» **Platform**
PS4 • Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
XSEED

» **Developer**
Edelweiss

» **Release**
Winter

Taking two disparate genres of play and finding a way to link them in a single interconnected narrative can make for challenging design, but the practice opens up the chance for novelty. Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin links together two styles of play I didn't expect to find together. In one moment, I'm leaping and fighting my way through 2D battle stages that recall Vanillaware action/RPGs, upgrading with new weapons and equipment, and taking on towering bosses. Moments later, I'm in a quiet Japanese village, threshing rice by hand in a contemplative simulation of ancient farming techniques. It's an unusual mix, but the early minutes I played have me intrigued.

Sakuna is a goddess whose heritage connects her somewhat paradoxically to both warfare and harvest domains. Banished to a demon-infested island, she befriends a group of humans and sets to work at the two things she's best at: devastating monsters with an array of farm implements as her weapons, and growing rice in her free time between battles.

Sakuna's fast-paced action scenes show a lot of promise. Levels are filled with demonic animals that must be culled, and the player is given a wide variety of light, heavy, and special attacks to bash and fling them around the screen. A central tool is Sakuna's celestial scarf, which can be whipped forward to catapult to the opposite side of a foe, or clamber to a distant ledge as if it were a grappling hook. The stage I played included branching paths, some of which held hidden rewards, like new weapons/farm tools or masks that upgrade Sakuna's capabilities.

Role-playing elements are also on display. The pause screen tracks Sakuna's stats, like strength, vitality, magic, and luck, and also showcases a system for different martial and raiment skills that are acquired over time. After the action stage, the game opens up into a large world map of the island, with an enticing collection of selectable levels to explore.

At the center of the island is Sakuna's home base. The view shifts from 2D to 3D here, as the adorably bouncy Sakuna skips through the traditional Japanese village. A planting paddy is at the heart of the quiet village, and just a brief tour through its features illustrates a farming system that is clearly going to take time to learn. Sakuna must till the land, plant the rice, harvest it, lay it out to dry, and thresh it from the husks, among other steps. As players navigate the goddess through her farming project, it's necessary to monitor weather, when to flood the paddy, the passage of days and seasons, and even fertilizer conditions. In the evenings, Sakuna settles down with the villagers for a meal of farmed rice and meat gathered in battle stages. The wide variety of course selections affect Sakuna's stats. The whole village experience is slow paced and deliberate, offering a potent counterpoint to the fast-moving battles.

Sakuna's adventure draws a lot of inspiration from classical Japanese mythology and the real-life experience of rice cultivation, one of the most important staple foods in the world. At first, it seems like a strange focus for a game, but after just a few minutes making wild guesses at the best methods, I was eager to learn more about how the familiar grain makes its way to my plate. If both the action and simulation elements prove their depth, Sakuna could be a surprise success when it arrives this winter.

» **Matt Miller**

Blacksad: Under The Skin

Curiosity killed the cat

A good mystery is the beginning of a great story, though it's also the beginning of a bad one for private investigator John Blacksad. The European detective noir graphic novel series with anthropomorphic animals that walk, talk, and generally act like it's the 1950s is getting its first video game adaptation. Titled Blacksad: Under the Skin, players put themselves in the flat-footed shoes of the private gumshoe in an original story new to the game.

Blacksad begins with the titular detective, a black tomcat with a gruff and grizzled voice, confronting an angry rhino in his small office. The rhino's wife hired Blacksad to take photographic evidence of the horned husband's infidelity, which he wants back from the private eye. After a fight that mostly involves quicktime events, the rhino gives Blacksad the opportunity to take a bribe and forget he has the photos, which gives players their first taste of moral choices that should be familiar to anyone who has played a narrative game in this style before.

Bloodied and bruised, Blacksad gets approached by a woman, a lynx whose father, Joe, recently committed suicide and hanged himself above a boxing ring in a gym he owned. As inheritor of the gym, Sonia Dunn reluctantly hires Blacksad to solve a missing person's case and investigate the whereabouts to find the gym's boxer, Bobby Yale. Blacksad takes the case, unable to shake the idea that Joe Dunn's apparent suicide and Bobby Yale's disappearance are inextricably and tragically linked.

The game has all the hallmarks of a classic detective story and, were it not for the sapient animals chattering on about affairs and death, nothing would seem out of the ordinary about it at all. The humanoid animals are fundamental to making that alien feeling work, however. Blacksad himself has cat-like observation powers, used to gather evidence or determine when a witness isn't telling the whole truth. Moreover, Blacksad does not use its populace as an excuse to avoid the thorny issues of 1950s New York and portrays a city still coming to grips with a pervasive segregationist mindset.

Based on the short demo, Blacksad: Under the Skin looks to tell an interesting story using source material that does not beat around the bush. A missing person's case slowly starts to evolve into something more as the feline detective pokes and prods around the city's seedy underbelly. Those familiar with the former Telltale's fare and even old-school LucasArts adventure games will find a lot of familiar territory to cover in Blacksad. » **Imran Khan**

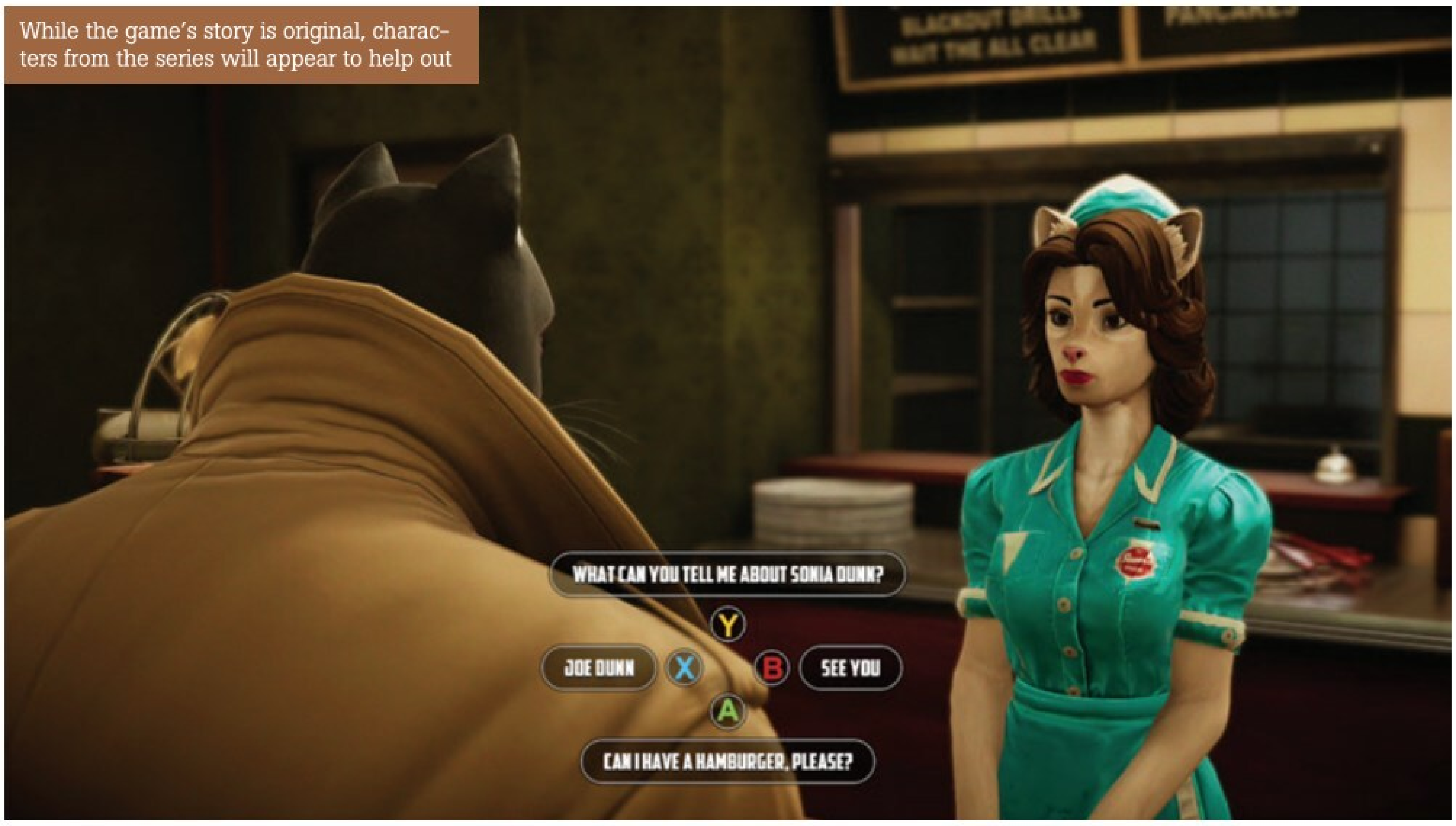
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

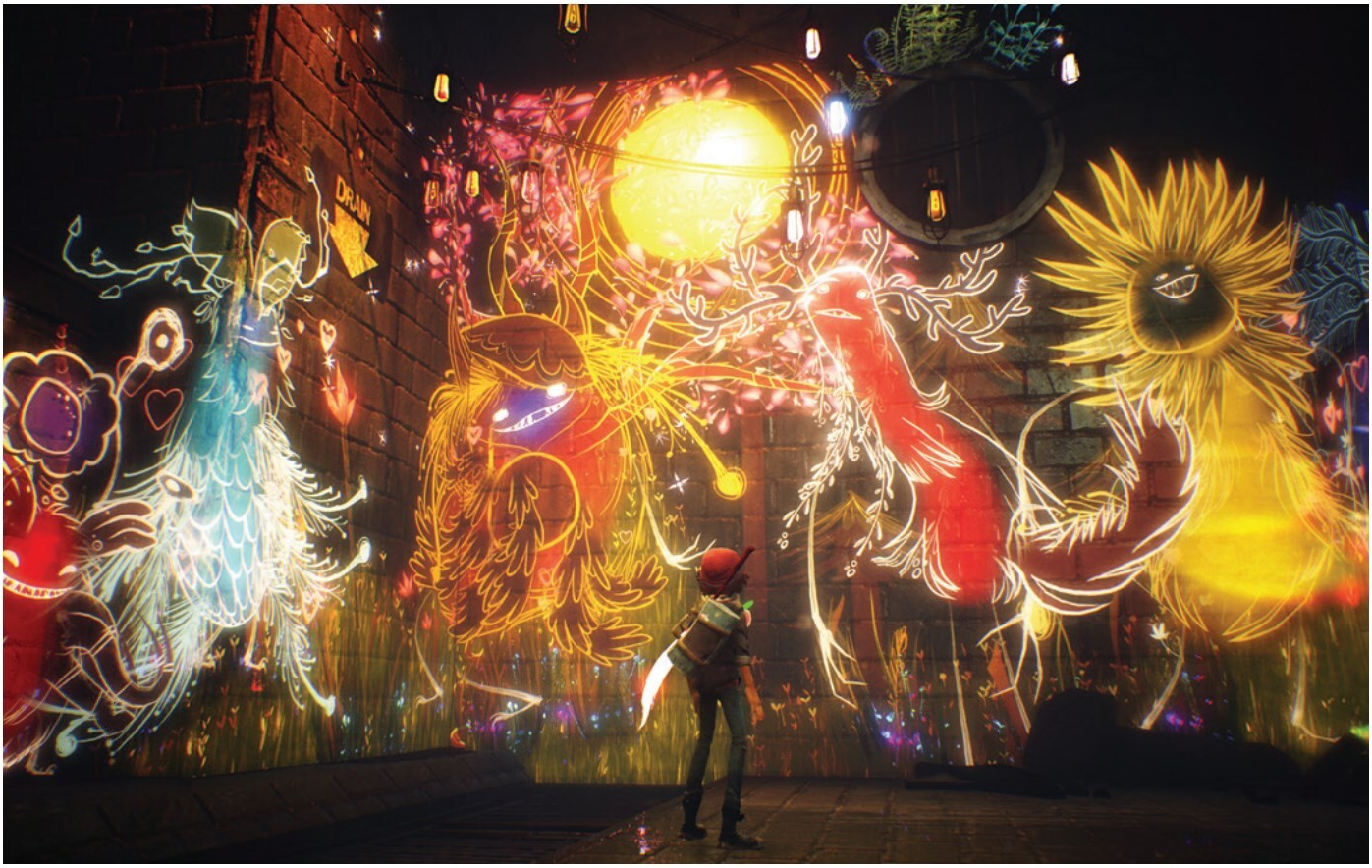
» Publisher
Microids

» Developer
Pendulo Studios

» Release
September 26


WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT SONIA DUNN?
Y
JOE DUNN
X
B
SEE YOU
A
CAN I HAVE A HAMBURGER, PLEASE?

While the game's story is original, characters from the series will appear to help out



Concrete Genie

Weaponizing art

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Pixelopus

» Release
October 8

Revealed a few years ago, Pixelopus' Concrete Genie has popped its head up from the ground a few times over the years. Every time the game has reemerged, it has shown something new: the ability to create your own creatures, a separate virtual-reality mode, and now a twist later in the game that turns the mechanics on their head.

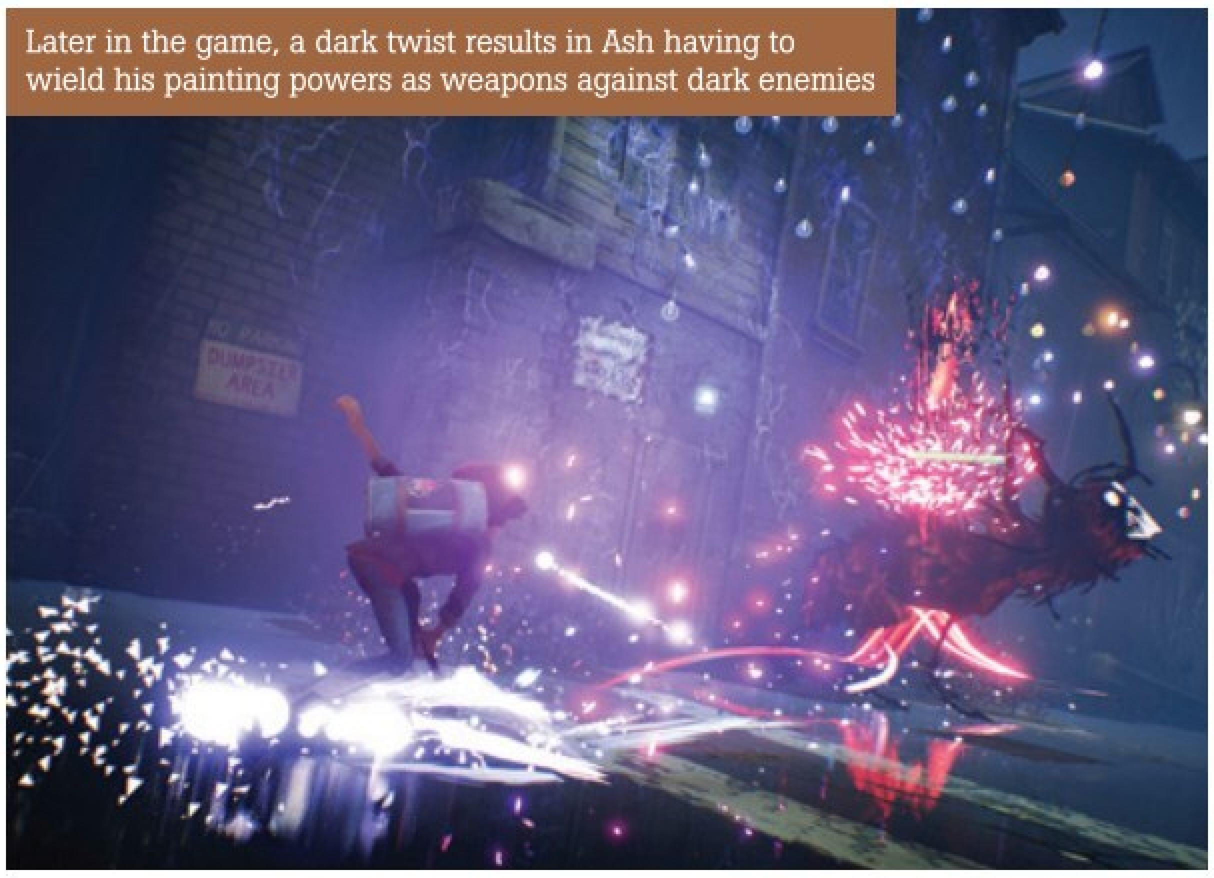
Emphasizing the ability to create art using the world as your canvas, the game is about expressing creativity as a means to solve puzzles and, in a grander sense, revitalize a dilapidated town. Concrete Genie is set in a derelict and decaying fictional port town named Denska, which became a haven for ne'er-do-well youths after an oil spill. Protagonist Ash has fond memories of the town from his childhood and insists on sitting on the pier and drawing, until some local bullies rip his sketchbook apart and trap him in a lighthouse rumored to be haunted.

While not strictly haunted, Ash discovers a magic paintbrush within the walls of the lighthouse that allows him to paint all manner of creatures and environments. These genies have their own artificial intelligence and behavior depending on how the player draws them, leading to a collection of totally unique genies by the end of the game.

This initial gameplay loop of Concrete Genie is a fairly chill experience, where Ash travels around Denska lighting up different districts with paintings and using genies to solve puzzles. Eventually, however, a story event occurs that upends the gameplay, prompting Ash to use these powers for a different purpose. Suddenly, enemies exist within the world of Concrete Genie, and the gameplay mechanics change to that of an action game as a contrast to the peaceful painting game from before.

Once the art brush has been weaponized, the game resembles something more like inFamous, and focuses on fast movement and projectiles. Ash skates around on a sliding tuft of paint, aiming at enemies to shoot magic paint at them. The different buttons give different elements of electric, fire, and wind, which lets Ash exploit enemy weaknesses and deal with bosses that shift elemental shields around. It's a fascinating change that, even with an established frame of context, still feels shocking to actually experience.

While the action-game twist seemingly comes in fairly late in the game, it's still a significant chunk of what Concrete Genie will have to offer. While Sony and Pixelopus want to keep what prompts this change a secret for now, the themes of the game come to a head alongside some significant escalation to make it all happen. Even knowing about this twist should make the dualities of Concrete Genie more poignant when players can finally get their hands on it. **» Imran Khan**



Later in the game, a dark twist results in Ash having to wield his painting powers as weapons against dark enemies

Persona 5 Royal

School is back in session

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Atlus

» Developer
Atlus

» Release
2020

If you talk to gamers who finished Persona 5 (which takes about 100 hours), they certainly won't say the massive RPG didn't have enough content. But that's not stopping Atlus from adding even more. Persona 5 Royal, like Persona 4 Golden before it, is a revised and expanded version of the original release. Old fans can return and find something new, and those who have been waiting to dive in can start with the definitive experience.

Even with Royal's new additions, the heart of Persona 5 remains unchanged. The story focuses on the Phantom Thieves, a group of high-school students at Shujin Academy who gain the ability to access an alternate reality and force evil-doers to admit their crimes. While righting the world's wrongs through turn-based combat, players also manage the hero's daily life by participating in school activities and building relationships with peers.

Persona 5 Royal has all of that, but contains new scenes, characters, and mechanics woven throughout the story. Producer Kazuhisa Wada and director Daiki Ito jointly explained how players should think about this new content: "Simply put, there's a 30-percent increase in new features. However, we've adjusted the overall playtime so it isn't too different from P5 … Rather than saying the game has been 'expanded,' it might be more appropriate to say that it has 'deepened.'"

Royal also has a substantial extra school term that continues the tale beyond the original ending. "The game is made so you can still enjoy the original storyline and ending," Wada and Ito say. "We think that the newly added scenes help to deepen the feeling of the game. How that ties in with the new term is something we would love for you to experience yourself, but depending on how you play, we've prepared several new endings unique to P5R."

Another meaningful addition is the new party member named Kasumi. She is a cheerful transfer student (and a gymnast) attending Shujin Academy on a scholarship, but she eventually gets wrapped up in the exploits of the Phantom Thieves and joins the team as a playable character. "In terms of combat skills, she mainly possesses physical attack skills and magic attack skills with Bless damage," Wada and Ito tell us. "She's more geared towards physical with high strength and speed, but can also heal, so she's a pretty well-rounded character."

The original formula is receiving many other adjustments, like improved pacing, quicker experience gain, and stylish new attacks. If you haven't played Persona 5 and have no point of reference for these changes, don't worry: No previous experience with the series is required to enjoy Royal when it releases next year. All you need is an appreciation for great RPGs, because one of the best of the generation is about to get even better. **» Joe Juba**

The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel III

Returning as a hero to mold a new class

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
NIS America

» **Developer**
Nihon Falcom

» **Release**
October 22

After a three-year hiatus and remasters of the first two entries for PS4, Nihon Falcom's The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel's third arc is upon us, and we've taken quite a road to get there. Following Class VII at Thors Military Academy has had no shortage of surprising reveals and epic battles, having the students do everything from partaking in crazy mech duels to stopping a civil war. For the third entry, the class we've come to know and love has graduated and is now entering adulthood. Things are changing, but after going hands-on for five hours, I can confirm the engaging loop that made the first two games so great is intact.

The captivating school dynamic remains as protagonist Rean is now a professor at a new branch of Thors Academy. Rean is coming off his heroics of stopping the Erebonian civil war, so there's still much fanfare around him, but his new teaching position is anything but glamorous. The new branch is populated with outcasts and misfits, and Rean leads a new "Class VII" with only three members initially. There's Kurt Vander, a determined young man who excels with twin blades; Juna Crawford, a gunner who formerly worked at the Crossbell police academy and isn't afraid to speak her mind; and Altina Orion, a mysterious girl created in a laboratory that we met last entry and can manipulate a black combat shell.

The opening hours showed an interesting dichotomy between the three classmates. Growing up in a lab and being treated like a weapon means Altina struggles with human interaction and considers options outside the most logical avenue. Kurt and Juna have a relationship very similar to Rean and Alisa in previous games, as both are trying to prove themselves and run into a few misunderstandings along the way. Throughout the opening chapter, you can find plenty of funny moments between the cast as Rean tries his best to play professor and has reunions with members of the previous Class VII.

Combat remains turn-based, and this entry expands on the already-complex battle mechanics with a break system to cut through enemy defenses, as well as Juna's ability to change her battle style. Juna's gunner position is great for ranged attacks and hitting groups of enemies, but if you swap her to the striker stance, it increases her speed, defense, and attack power on close-ranged foes, and is best used on a single target.

Also new is Brave Order, which allows you to enact tide-changing perks in battle. Every character has their own perk, and they can do everything from reducing damage to cutting the cost of magic. You can only use one of these at a time, but they are key to winning boss battles. For instance, in one of my fights against a giant ogre, the creature used a howl attack that had a nasty side effect of reducing my characters' defense. The only way to offset it was to use a brave order to reduce incoming damage.

Fans will feel right at home with Trails of Cold Steel III. It has the fun of getting to know a new town, school, and students, while also offering plenty of callbacks to past games. The new combat additions provide an extra layer of strategy to keep things interesting. I can't wait to see what crazy adventures are in store for Rean and his students. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Embr

Five star firefighting

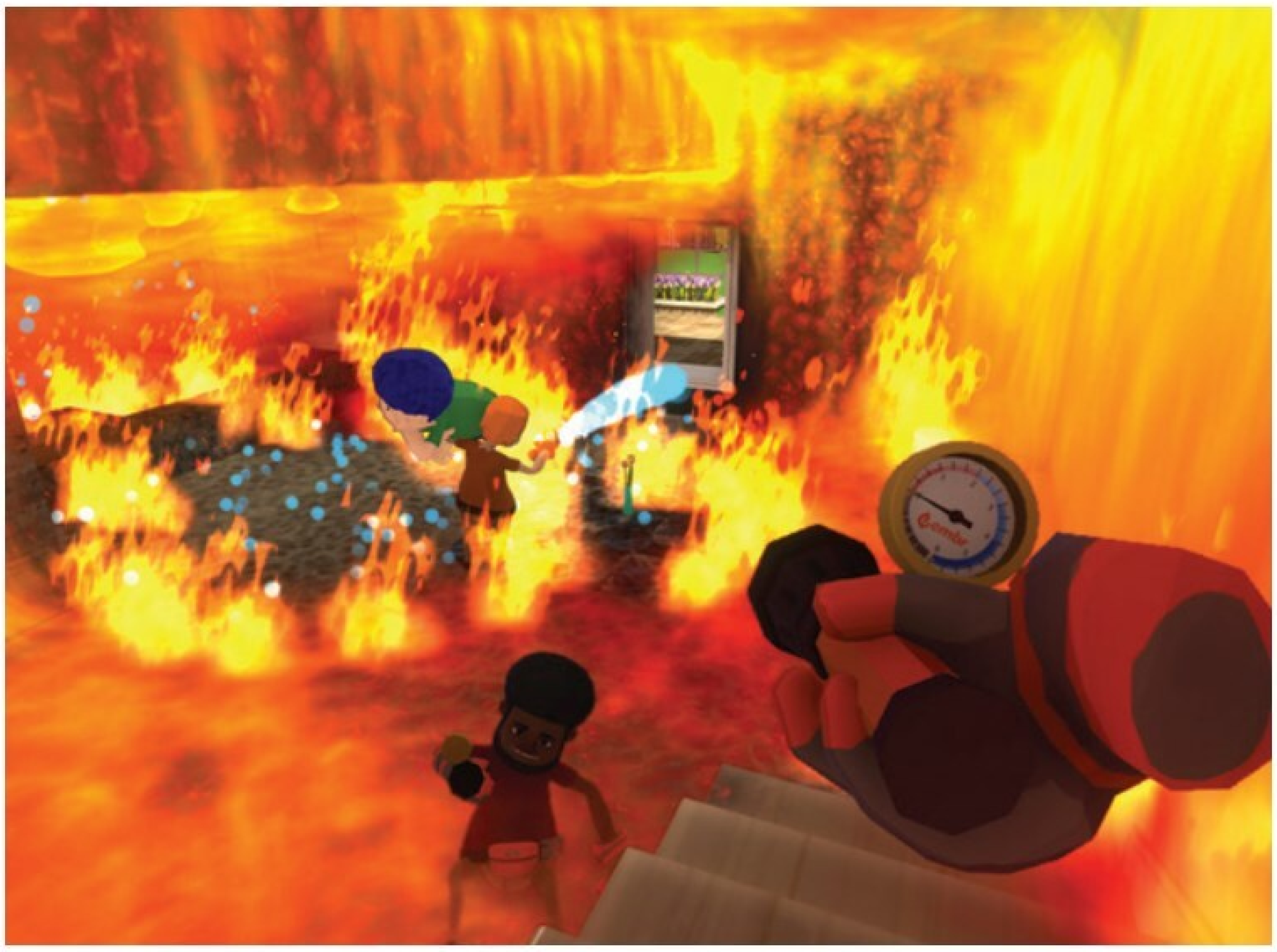
» Platform
PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Action

» Publisher
Muse Games

» Developer
Muse Games

» Release
2020



We live in a gig economy, where the rise of social networking and mobile computing has allowed companies like Uber, Lyft, and AirBnb to alter the way we conduct business. Inspired by this economic market, Muse Games has taken ride sharing to the next logical step: emergency services. Players who join the Embr Respondr crew assume the role of a contract firefighter tasked with battling fires, rescuing trapped civilians, and protecting their reputation from angry user reviews.

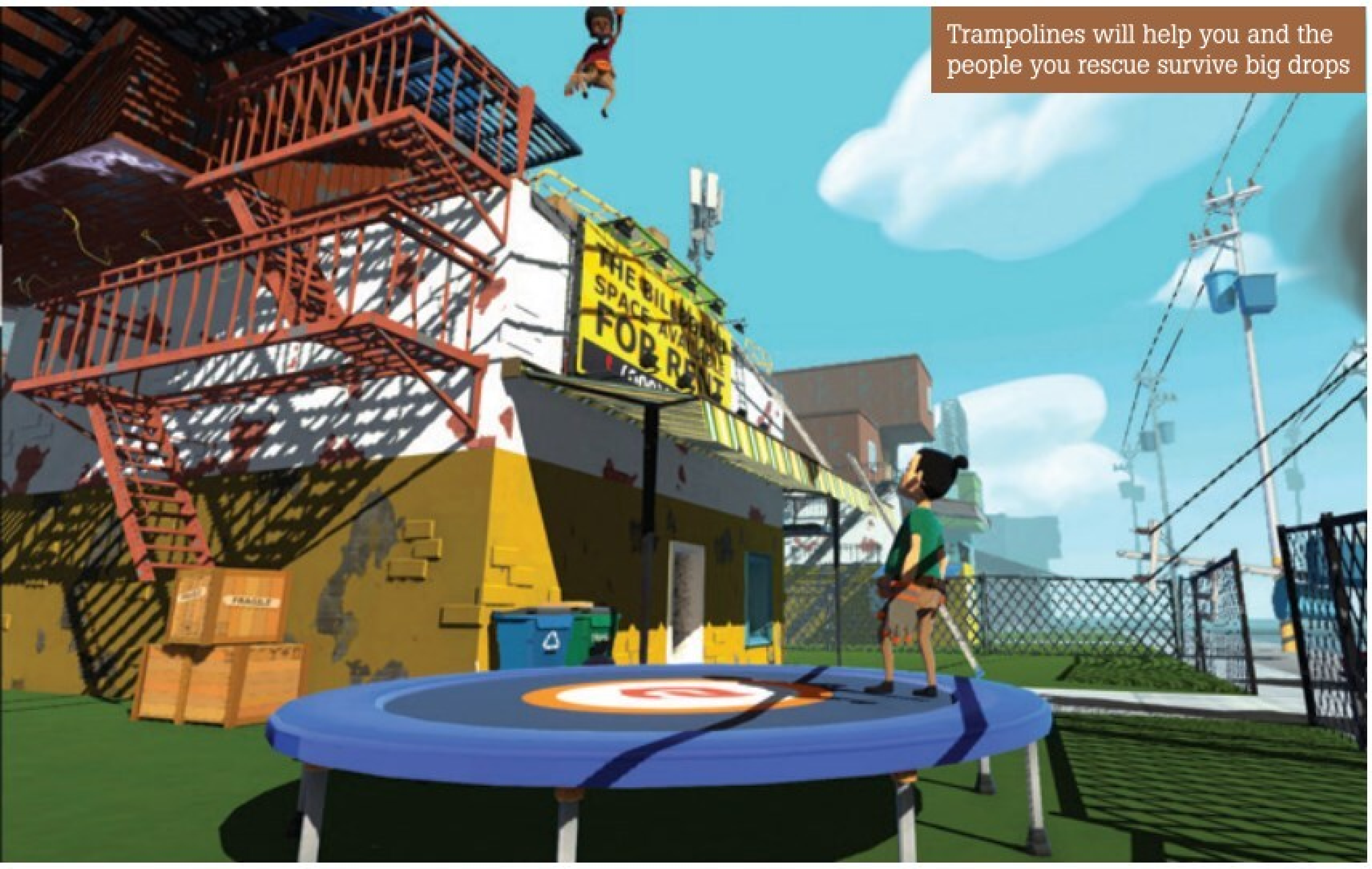
"As an Embr Respondr, you are responsible for saving people's lives," says director Matthew Niederberger. "When you open up your map on the Embr app, you'll see you've got a couple calls – a couple houses on fire – and you can pick which one you want to respond to. You can battle these fires alone or you can team up with some friends and rescue people together."

Rescuing civilians isn't always easy, and every call features its own pitfalls. Fortunately, overcoming Embr's environmental hazards often leads to goofy hijinks thanks to Embr's system-driven mechanics. Civilians follow you toward safety, but you will need to carve a path for them. Do you push back the flames with your water hose? Do you use your axe to open a new exit on a nearby wall? Or do you use a ladder to create a shortcut to the ground?

Players choose how they overcome each obstacle and how they circumvent each challenge, but fire is like a wild creature and you don't always know how it is going to act. When I took too long in one building, the fire ate through the floor and I fell into the basement, so I had to find another route outside. On another mission, I accidently knocked a civilian unconscious when I hit them with my water hose and I had to carry them to safety.

"We discovered early on while designing puzzles with one solution that if someone doesn't get it, the game falls apart, so from a design perspective we stopped designing puzzles and started designing obstacles," Niederberger says. "It's kind of a philosophical piece of our design ethos these days. We just put things in players' ways and give them lots of tools. They might come up with a more interesting way to get through them than we would."

That toolset expands greatly as you use your firefighting earnings to purchase new equipment and vehicles directly from the Embr app. Most equipment can be upgraded several times. For example, water hoses have upgrades for greater water capacity and higher hose pressure, which makes it easier to push people and obstacles around. An auto refill upgrade means you won't have to run back to your response vehicle in the middle of a mission. Another handy tool is the grappling hook, which can be used to pull people and other objects around the environment, and this can be upgraded to have a greater reach or to pull heavier objects.



Trampolines will help you and the people you rescue survive big drops

Embr isn't the only firefighting squad on the market, and during your rise to firefighting glory you might run into the competition. A Canadian firefighting startup called Hosr aims to bring socialized firefighting back to the United States. However, since you've signed a non-compete agreement with Embr, Hosr can't hire you, which makes you their enemy.

"Every once in a while, you'll get a call that seems a little suspicious, and it won't be your usual rescue mission," Niederberger says. "When you get one of these suspicious calls, you might end up trapped in a building, and you'll have to use your knowledge of firefighting to escape any way you can. These missions will be a little more puzzle oriented. There'll be some mechanics that you have to learn a little more deeply, so you might need to spray water on an electrical outlet where the wires have been cut to open a door, for example."

Embr is goofy and full of oddball antics, but it also offers an interesting commentary on the perils of working as a contract laborer. Muse Games aims to unleash Embr early next year on PC, and is currently exploring console options. It might not set the world on fire, but we can't wait to play more.

» Ben Reeves

Maneater

A crunchy seaside buffet

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Tripwire Interactive

» Developer
Tripwire Interactive

» Release
TBD

The idea of playing as a shark devouring people and other predators of the sea seems so tailor-made for games, it's disappointing how little it's been used. Outside of Jaws Unleashed, the mobile hit Hungry Shark, and Depth, the shark simulator subgenre is shockingly bare. Tripwire Interactive looks to change that with Maneater, an open-world RPG where you play as the ocean's most famous predator. According to game director Bill Munk, you start off as a "small shark pup" swimming about the Gulf Coast and work your way up, gaining mass and abilities as you devour everything you come across. Your voracious diet helps you survive a harsh environment filled with predators bigger than you and, of course, shark hunters.

"Scaly Pete is the villain in this tale, and he's the best shark hunter in the gulf," Munk says. Pete disfigures the protagonist when it's a baby, creating the stakes for a grudge match that will play out over the entirety of the game as the player grows more powerful thanks to the shark's uncanny ability to "grow and evolve far beyond what nature intended."

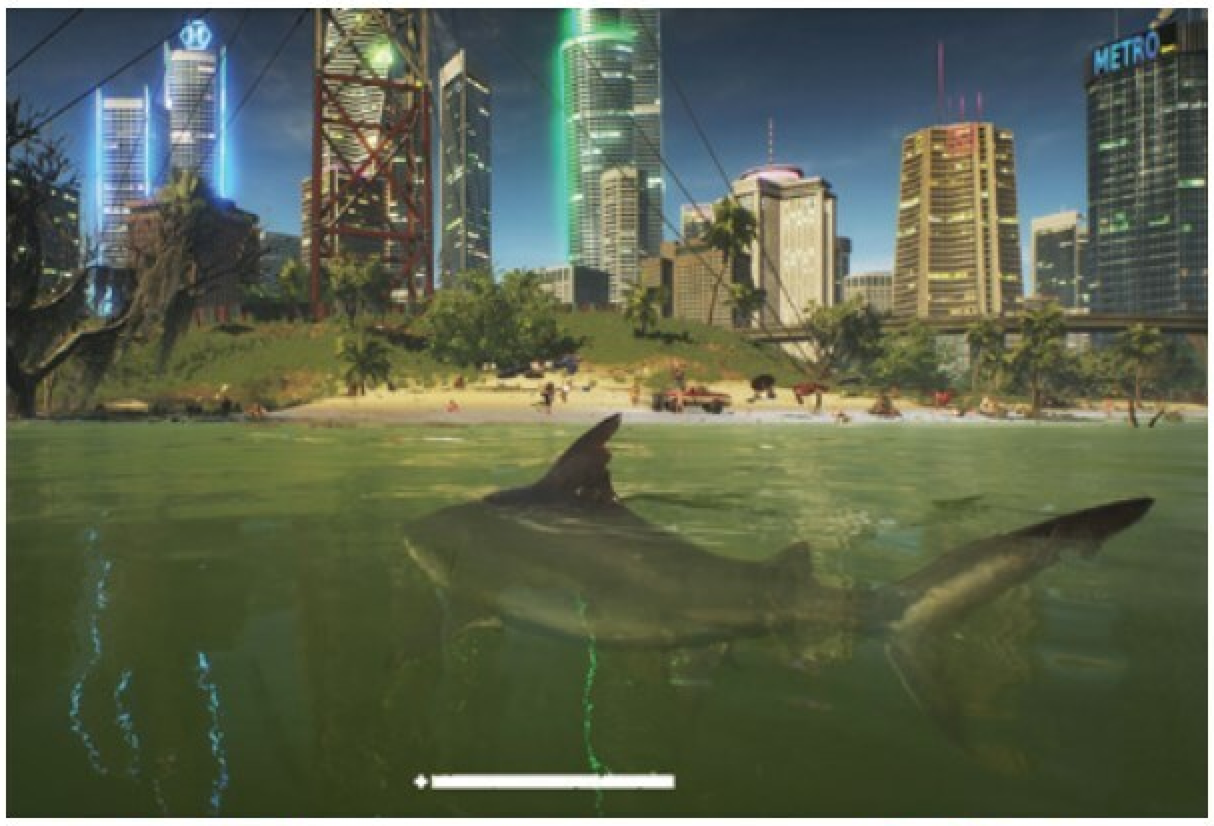
Maneater wisely leans more into the macabre and wacky, as suggested by its cartoony aesthetic, discarding realism to focus on making the player feel powerful through the wild abilities you can grant your shark.

Just what kind of abilities does our soon-to-be-massive friend have? One of them is called Whipshot, which sounds like the catalyst to some delightful carnage. The ability lets you grab objects and use them as projectile weapons to fire at both foes and prey. Munk says as long as it can fit in the shark's jaws, you can Whipshot any object.

Evolutions are a subset of powers that give your shark new capabilities as well. The one teased for us is a bone evolution that lets your shark form extra bones all over its body, increasing its mass as well as damage output for other abilities. Using evolutions with your ability set lets you create devastating combos, like turning your lunging ability (the shark's version of sprint) into a deadly battering-ram attack that wreaks havoc on anything in its path.

Often the most eye-catching quality of sharks in the wild is their massive size, so it makes sense that the guiding principle of power in Maneater is mass. "The bigger you are, the more powerful you become," Munk says. Defeating challenging foes gives you access to abilities and nutrients that let you build your size and gain new evolutions to use.

Given how enticing Whipshot and the Bone evolution sound, we're curious to see what other gleefully gory delights this shark simulator has tucked behind its rows of teeth. » **Javy Gwaltney**



ARK SIGHTED
ENTER WATER AT
OWN RISK

NHL 20

Wheel, snipe, celly, repeat

As we detailed last month, NHL 20 delivers an audio/visual makeover, boasting a new commentary team, a redesigned broadcast presentation packing, and some much-needed player differentiation in the form of signature shots for the league's biggest superstars. After recently going hands-on with the game, we learned more about how the gameplay should feel different, as well.

Outside of adding a few new trick shots, EA hasn't done much to revolutionize shooting in NHL over the past several years. This neglected area of gameplay gets a fresh twist in NHL 20, with a renewed investment in adding more contextual shots. We've all had that awkward moment where we think we're perfectly positioned for a one-timer across the crease, only to see the player warp into a jarring shooting animation. Though we still saw one or two instances where this happened, it was a far less common occurrence in our hands-on session and surging forwards connected on far more shot attempts. Players can now lean further to get their stick on the puck for a shot, drop down to their knee to get more velocity on a shot coming from an inaccurate pass, and jam their stick forward for tap-in one-timers when close to the crease. As a result, one-timers feel like they will be a lot easier to convert this year.

NHL 20 also feels faster thanks to a change in the way puck pickups work. In previous games, players automatically entered a glide state before receiving a pass, which killed their speed advantage rushing through the neutral zone. In NHL 20, players can now pass and shoot without breaking their stride, and the difference is noticeable when you're on the sticks.

The new contextual shot animations, signature shots, and more efficient movement all should give the game a boost of offense.

To counteract this somewhat and fix some of the cheese headaches players suffered through last year, NHL 20 gives goaltenders some love with 400 new save animations. New glove saves should cut down on the number of soft shots that slip past netminders, and goalies now have the awareness to identify secondary threats and redirect rebounds away from forwards crashing the net. Given the faster pace on the ice, we also saw a lot more big hits in NHL 20. Checking may be the most effective way of slowing down opponents if you can line up your hits correctly.

When it comes to modes, NHL 20 focuses primarily on building out its World of Chel outdoor experience with offline Ones and the new Eliminator variant of Ones and Threes. Franchise mode also gets some love in the form of a new coaching carousel and trade finders. Fans of Be A Pro and EASHL, however, don't have many major changes to look forward to. Will this be enough for NHL to build on last year's success? We'll find out when it takes the ice in September. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Vancouver

» **Release**
September 13

WRC 8

Taking more time between stages

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Maximum Games

» Developer
Kylotonn

» Release
September

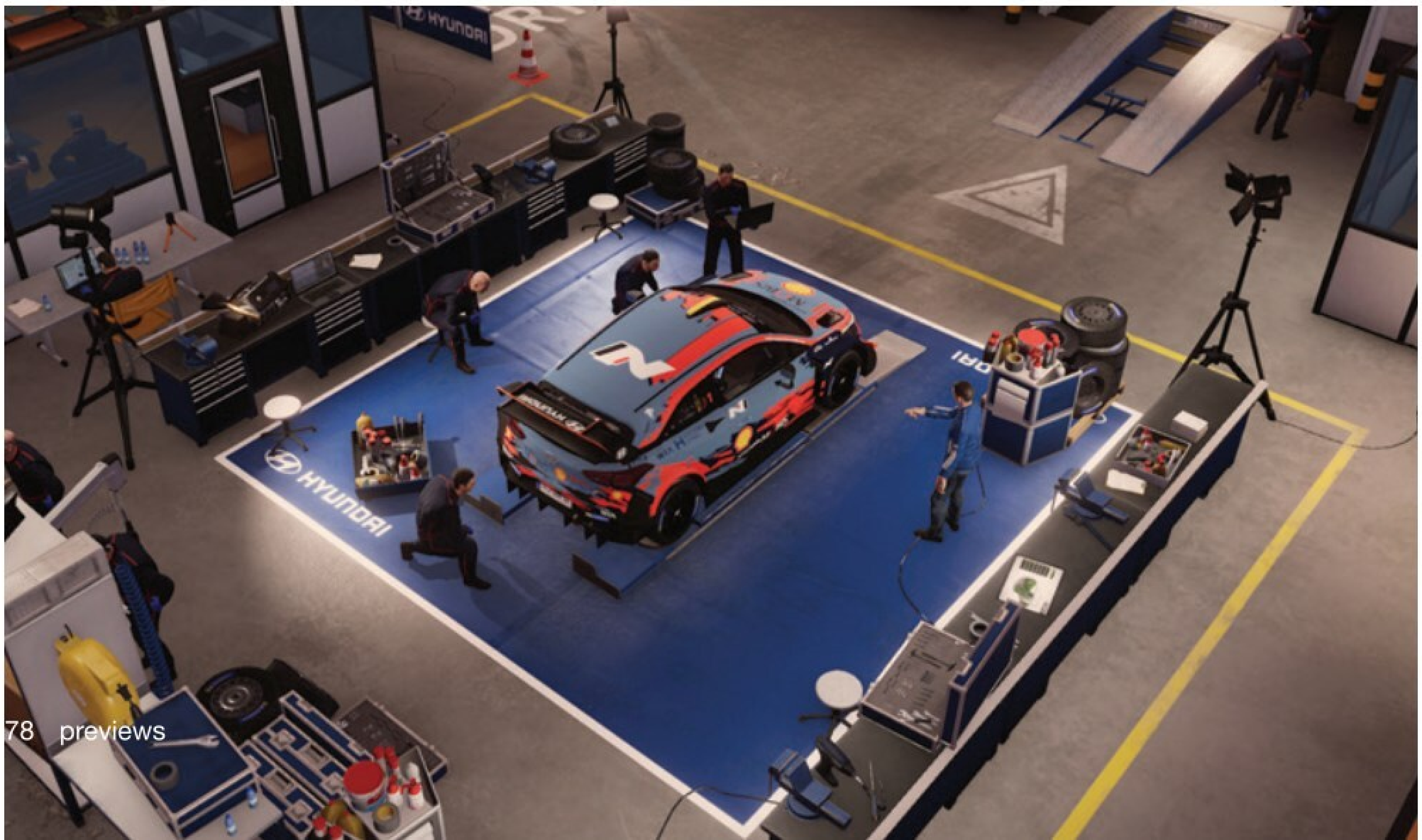
French developer Kylotonn's WRC FIA World Rally Championship franchise isn't the biggest fish in the video game rally-racing pond, even though it has the series' official license. But the studio has been working on its craft to address the situation, culminating in WRC 8 – a game Kylotonn took a year off to make.

The break from the yearly release grind definitely shows in WRC 8; the game features an extensive career mode – a big step forward for the series. A successful racing program is about more than just the person behind the wheel, and WRC 8 rewards well-run organizations with better part performance and reliability during stages, including the ability to activate perks suited to certain rally conditions, such as snow.

Your crew is as important as the R&D skill trees you unlock. You have to recruit, train, and rest them through a calendar of rallies and special events like test drives for manufacturers (including historic cars) so you can reap the benefits. Six different crew positions must be filled in your organization, including a weather team that makes sure you stay ahead of the dynamic weather, a medical staff, and mechanics who ensure you get the most out of your time fixing the car in the service area. Kylotonn says players can unlock more unannounced crew roles as well.

Kylotonn has also put work into the graphics and gameplay, in particular improving drivers' ability to slide cars into the corners and accelerate out, as well as differentiating the various surface types and WRC-2 and WRC Junior support championships from the main WRC series. We're curious to see how these tweaks combine with the dynamic weather to test drivers through already difficult rallies – including the new Chile and Turkey locations.

It isn't always easy to make up time on the competition during a stage, trying to press through the turns and finding tenths of a second here and there. But Kylotonn doesn't seem to be cutting corners when it comes to helping improve WRC's standing. Bulking up the career mode and investing more in gameplay in historic areas of need could provide an immediate, positive impact that proves the developer's extra time was well spent.
» Matthew Kato



NASCAR Heat 4

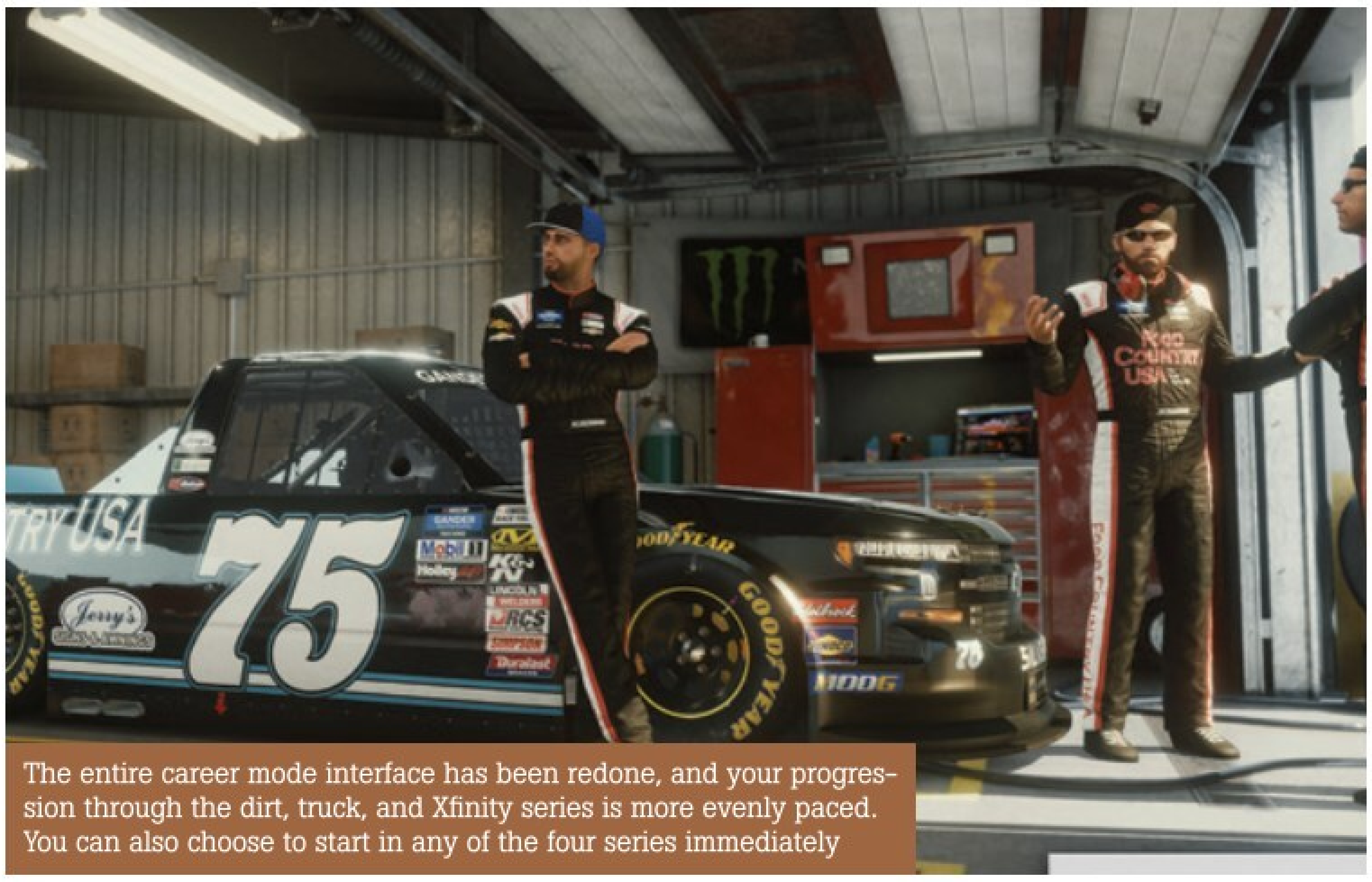
Working within the box

NASCAR teams are always trying to work within the association's rules to find any edge in a sport ostensibly designed for parity. Similarly, the box within which developer Monster Games operates is limited in the sense that most fans don't want crazy fantasy tracks or anything that strays far from what they see on Sundays. The series has been criticized for not replicating the sport enough in some areas, but this iteration tries to shore this up by simultaneously fixing existing problems and giving players more control over their own racing experience.

The introduction of various optional gameplay sliders creates tighter racing with more opportunities to draft and pass, as well as allow the A.I. to use different racing lines on the track. In my hands-on time with the game, it was cool to see cars use high, middle, and low lines across the track, reducing single-file racing and therefore being freight-trained by the A.I. when you step out of line. Other settings address issues such as whether cars lose traction on contact and A.I. cars' tires wearing properly.

That's not to say the changes solve all of the franchise's problems. While the career mode makes it important to keep your chassis clean from week to week and lets you upgrade your pit crew's performance, larger elements, like a crew chief and the ability to add a second team, are still absent.

NASCAR Heat 4 might not be adding the kitchen sink, but key additions could solve old problems and help move the series toward the realism fans crave. » **Matthew Kato**



The entire career mode interface has been redone, and your progression through the dirt, truck, and Xfinity series is more evenly paced. You can also choose to start in any of the four series immediately

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing (40-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
704Games

» **Developer**
Monster Games

» **Release**
September 13

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

89 Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Fire Emblem: Three Houses doubles down on social elements and makes important combat changes to give this strategy/RPG series a fresh feel. You are a professor molding the best and the brightest students, making your time count on and off the battlefield. With various branching paths, including your house and battlefield allegiances, you watch your students grow – for better or worse – into the people they're meant to be. How you guide them in the ugly face of conflict and bloodshed makes for an engrossing experience that's hard to put down.

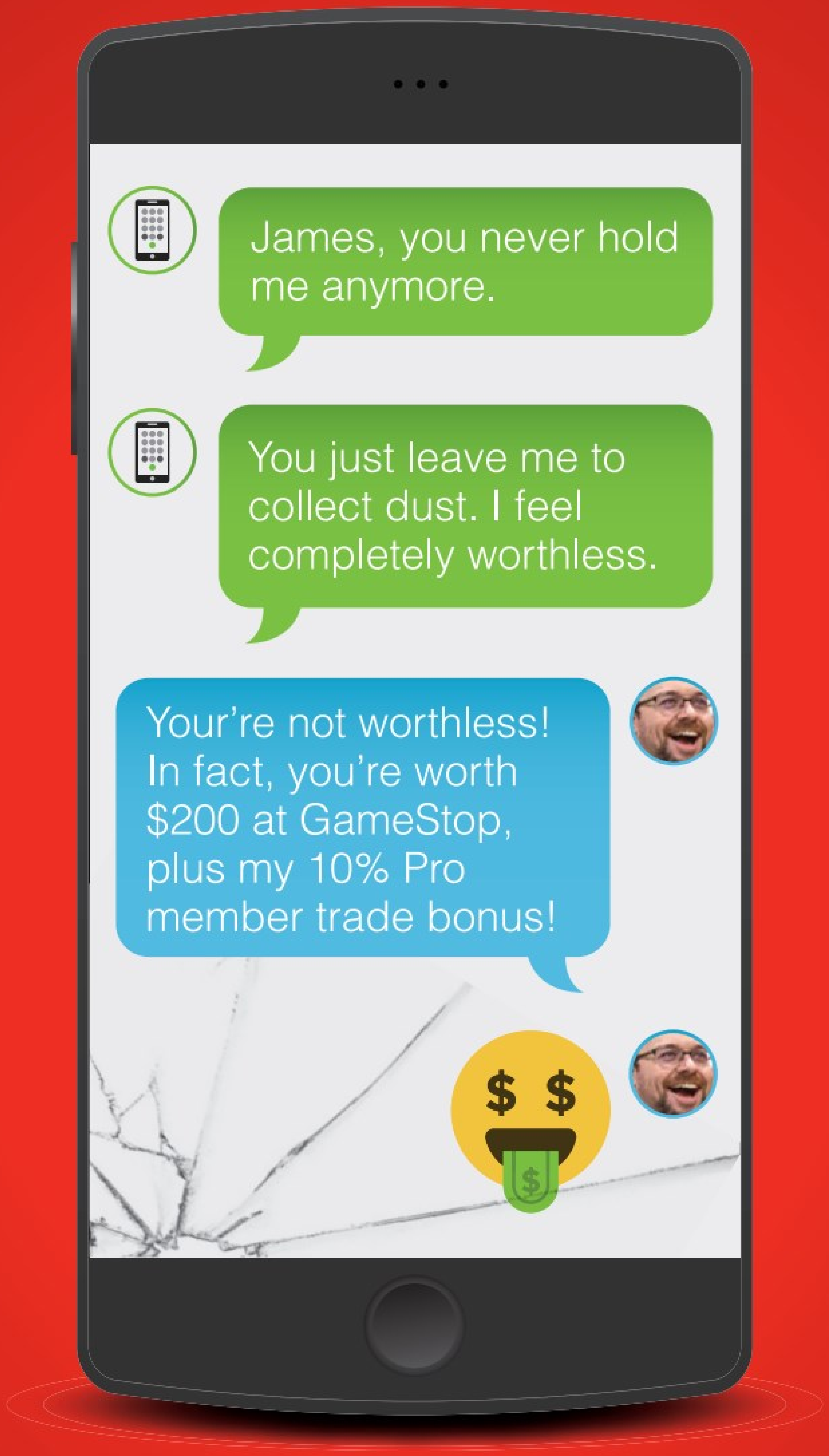
THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Your favorite franchise is back … on mobile.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings



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GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS

Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

A tribute worth its trials

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Create a new franchise that melds the action, exploration, and RPG elements that made Castlevania: Symphony of the Night successful

» Graphics
Characters, monsters, and environments are colorful and distinct, though animations look stiff and clunky up close

» Sound
The voice acting can be a bit stilted at times, but the music is appropriately gothic, with the occasional guitar thrown in

» Playability
A flexible array of magic attacks complement the accessible hack-and-slash repertoire, and Castlevania fans will find familiar tricks and maneuvers

» Entertainment
Ritual of the Night starts off familiar, but quickly ramps up into an impressive exemplar of the genre it's retreading

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** ArtPlay
Release June 18 (PS4, Xbox One, PC), June 25 (Switch) **Rating** T

At first, Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night feels a bit staid. Though the series is new, it sees longtime Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi returning to the formula he helped define over the years with titles like Symphony of the Night. Because Bloodstained overtly draws from that tradition, the opening hours reproduce many moments fans of 2D Castlevania titles have seen before. However, this spiritual successor slowly and surely earns its keep among greats by cleverly mixing familiar elements of the genre.

The sprawling map is the cornerstone of the experience; the giant castle you explore belongs to a demented "shardbinder" named Gebel (not Dracula), and it's enormous, winding, and a joy to uncover. As Miriam, a fellow shardbinder who can absorb the power of monsters she slays, your path can occasionally be circuitous; I often had to hoof it from a save room to a teleport room to my base of operations to stock up on supplies, then back to a save room before taking on a boss. But slowly filling out the map is a satisfying slow burn. Most areas stick to the castle's gothic themes, but later locales introduce some fun surprises that kept me eager to see where I'd head next.

You acquire new traversal abilities as you go, though this progression starts off a little slow. The double-jump won't resolve as many loose ends on the map as you think it might, and sometimes your next destination is too vague. However, you eventually get fantastic abilities that are fun to wield and open the way forward, like a reflector beam you can use to sneak through tight spaces, or the ability to run at ridiculous speeds. By the time you've been through most of the map, you feel like you have total mastery of your surroundings, though later areas still provide interesting challenges.

Combat also takes a little while to come into its own. The main hook is that Miriam can equip shards that give her the powers of the monsters she kills. These initially manifest as additional attacks that cost mana or passive bonuses, but quickly offer up a number of different ways to approach combat. Do you tackle a tough area or boss by slowly healing yourself over time, or double down on damage by creating a copy of yourself?

If you're familiar with 2D Castlevania games, the tricks you've memorized (such as attacking right before you land to get an extra-fast second attack in) still work, and the familiar muscle memory is a nice touch. But until the additional layers unravel, Bloodstained's opening sections feel unremarkable, because encounters involve little more than ducking and weaving out of monsters' attacks to deliver your own. Only when you start amassing interesting shards can you start exploring your options.

A healthy dose of RPG mechanics keeps combat exciting and give you another reason to scour every inch of the castle. As you defeat enemies, explore, and level up, you find weapons with different ranges and elemental properties, as well as other equipment and items. As these different options compound on each other, I swapped between multiple shard and gear loadouts, since some weapons and skills work better against certain enemies. And while some bosses simply let you wail on them until they're dead, others require you to learn their movements or try different builds to survive, which means being flexible and experimental with your skills.

The best equipment is locked behind extensive crafting or side-questing. This aspect can be convoluted and prone to grinding; later quests and recipes require you to farm monsters that have a low chance of dropping a particular component, and I wound up with too much stuff that didn't seem crucial. However, once I found recipes for the most powerful weapons, I held off on finishing the game to go seek out their ingredients and craft them. The power boost you get from these items is worth the time spent acquiring them.

Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night's journey is familiar, but the way it iterates and builds on that familiarity helps distinguish it from its lineage. The combat, RPG elements, and enticing exploration intertwine seamlessly, and had me obsessively scouring every nook and cranny of a gigantic map for hours, even after I'd defeated the last boss. I enjoyed finally returning to this haunted castle, even if it belongs to a new master. **» Suriel Vazquez**

The Switch Difference

If you want to take Bloodstained with you on a Switch, know that this version is a step below its counterparts. Textures look far muddier on Nintendo's console, making cutscenes and models that would otherwise pass muster look outright bad. The framerate also takes a hit, and combat feels more sluggish as a result. Unless you absolutely insist on portability, I suggest opting for one of the other versions.

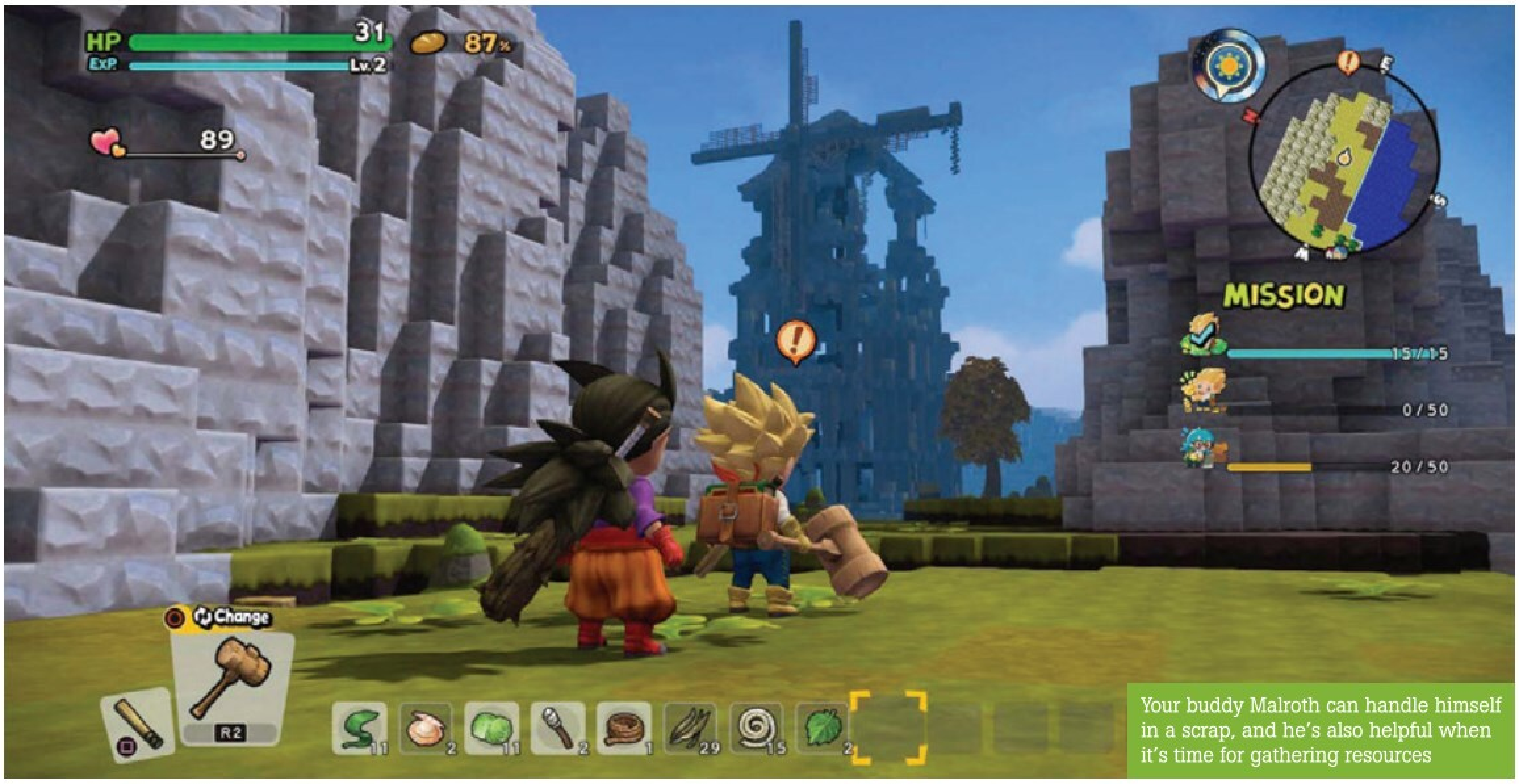
Score: 8

Dragon Quest Builders 2

Rebuilding hope, one block at a time

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Omega Force, Square Enix **Release** July 12 **Rating** E10+



Your buddy Malroth can handle himself in a scrap, and he's also helpful when it's time for gathering resources

The original Dragon Quest Builders took Minecraft to the workbench and bolted on some much-appreciated structure to the building experience. Despite a repetitive formula, it was an enjoyable playground for those of us who enjoy freeform Lego construction but keep the instructions off to the side just in case. Now Omega Force and Square Enix are back with a hefty sequel that improves virtually every aspect of that original blueprint.

You're a helpful hero with a rare capacity to build. You and your new A.I. companion, Malroth, travel the world and leave things better off than when you first arrived. Unlike the last game, you're traveling on a ship instead of resurrecting in new places. Consequently, you have a port to call home. This island begins as a barren, desolate place you won't be able to leave quickly enough. Over time, you can make it flourish however you see fit, but you need some extra hands to make that happen, and for that you have to go for a quick sail.

The three main islands showcase different biomes and gameplay systems. For instance, one of the first places you visit, Furrowfield, is where you learn about farming. Thanks to an engaging story about an anti-builder cult and poisoned land, it doesn't feel like you're running through a tutorial sequence. I had a great time rebuilding the land and the raising the spirits of the various NPCs. It's silly, but it's hard not to smile when a group of villagers rushes over and applauds when you build them a swingset – and they absolutely lose their minds when you complete one of their larger requests. As you improve villages, your efforts attract more recruits who move in and help with some of the less demanding tasks like cooking and tending the fields. That gives you more time to explore and solve puzzles out in the world or engage in the simple combat against wandering monsters.

Other places teach you about mining and building defenses, and give you access to new blocks and items that you can take back to your home island. Online co-op allows you to enlist your friends to help you during free-play on your home island, but they can't contribute to your story progress. There's a fairly significant catch, though: Co-op doesn't unlock until you complete the first story island and a few missions back at home base – a process that can easily take more than a dozen hours. Building with a friend is fine, but the single-player campaign is clearly the thrust of the experience; if you're looking for a quick co-op game, this isn't it.

If you're looking for a quick game overall, this isn't it, either. I adore Dragon Quest Builders 2, but be prepared to settle in for a long journey. Even after spending about 50 hours with it, I was still unlocking new items and equipment, some of which are significant, like a pencil that allows you to create your own blueprints. The rollout of new building options is generous, but players who are looking to dive right into freeform building will find they're working with a fairly limited palette unless they make more progress into the story.

Fortunately, the campaign is peppy and fun, and filled with characters that have their own little personalities. The overall cheer and goodwill make the darker moments, such as a character's slide toward evil, feel all the more unsettling. Similarly, it's kind of weird to see these fallen cutie-pies muttering "Damn" after they've been vanquished in battle. I'm not a Dragon Quest fan by any stretch, but that didn't dampen my enjoyment. Longtime fans might get excited to see familiar enemies, but you don't need any experience with previous games to have a great time.

Dragon Quest Builders 2 has remarkable improvements, both large and small. Boss battle are now actually kind of fun. NPCs help you build some of the more ambitious projects, which lets you focus on doing your own thing. Malroth helps fight and gather resources, so you aren't on your own. Other players' creations are highlighted in loading screens and in-game bulletin boards, and you can easily visit (but not destroy) their worlds. This is one of those rare sequels that delivers on just about every front, so long as you're able to put in the time it asks of you. This definitely isn't a weekend project, but it's one that's absolutely worth the effort.

» **Jeff Cork**

9

PS4 • Switch

» **Concept**
Restore a broken world (or build to your heart's content) using your hero's mysterious builder powers

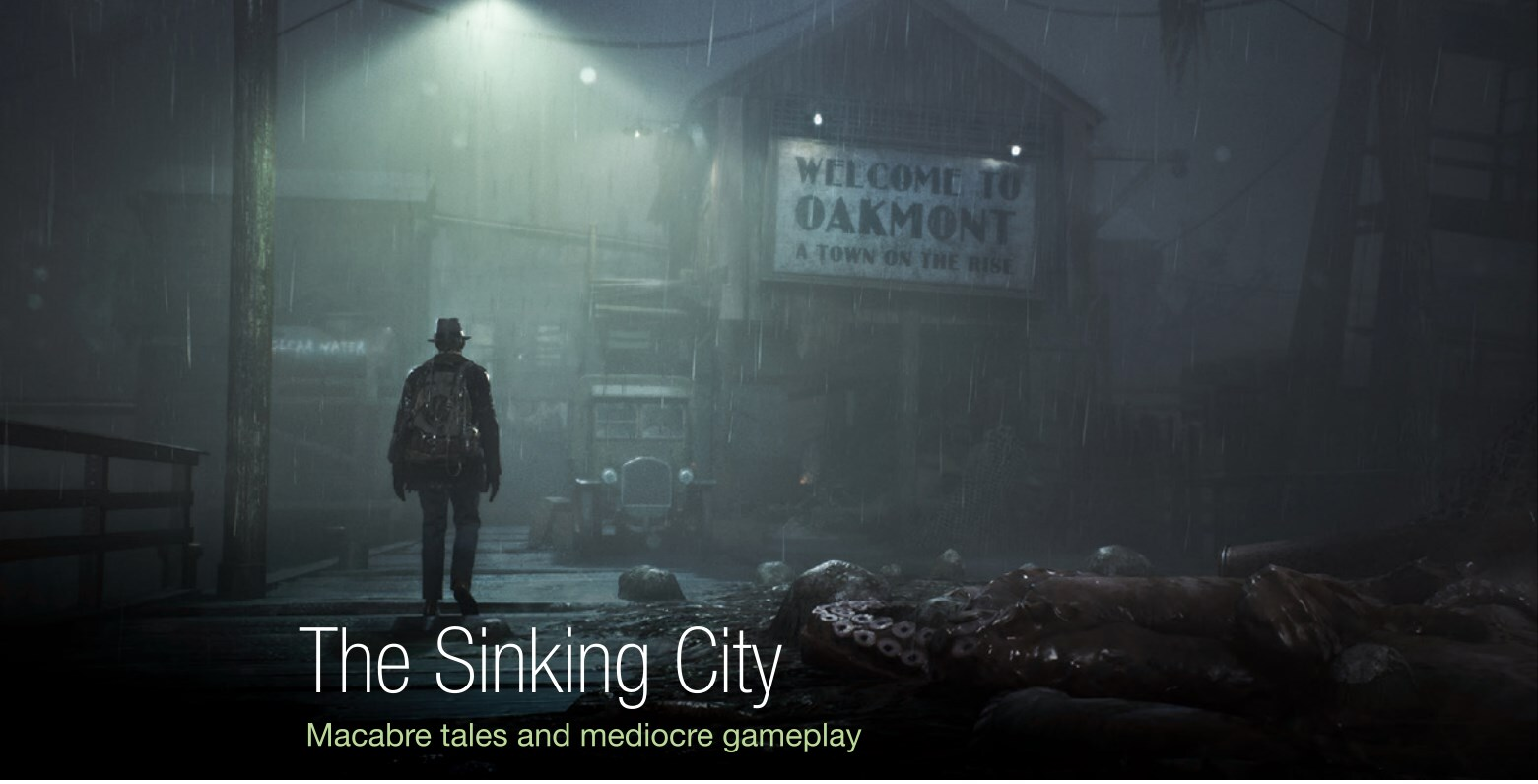
» **Graphics**
Blocks may be the dominant sights in this world, but wonderful character designs and an impressive array of other props keep it from being bland

» **Sound**
Every location has an appropriate theme, and actions are accompanied by simple, appropriate effects

» **Playability**
Everything from combat to construction is simple and intuitive. Inventory management is a breeze, which is great considering it's a huge part of the experience

» **Entertainment**
Dragon Quest Builders 2 is a fantastic sequel that expands on the original in almost every imaginable way

» **Replay Value**
High



The Sinking City

Macabre tales and mediocre gameplay

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Solve Lovecraftian mysteries while fending off eldritch monsters in a half-sunken open world

» Graphics
Frogwares has crafted some intriguing and atmospheric locales, but technical issues undermine the immersion

» Sound
An understated musical score helps build tension. The voice performances are passable at best

» Playability
The gunplay is stiff and rarely satisfying. Investigation mechanics are well done, but eventually grow repetitive

» Entertainment
The Sinking City succeeds at creating a memorable world and twisting narrative that pulls players beyond its mediocre gameplay

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Bigben Interactive **Developer** Frogwares **Release** June 27 **Rating** M

Frogwares has made a name for itself with wannabe detectives through a run of imperfect-but-entertaining Sherlock Holmes adventure games built around deductive reasoning. However, the developer's interest in this unique brand of puzzle-solving extends beyond the world-famous consulting detective. The Sinking City is Frogwares' latest and most ambitious adventure game to date, setting players loose in a Lovecraftian open world with a journal full of twisted cases. The expanded scope and greater emphasis on action introduce issues, but as a whole, The Sinking City still presents a mystery worth unraveling.

Players take on the role of Charles Reed, a private detective whose horrific visions have brought him to Oakmont, the titular sinking city ravaged by a mysterious flood and the supernatural terrors it has unleashed on the beleaguered population. As you undertake cases for various influential families and factions, Reed is quickly ensnared in Oakmont's politics and power struggles. Like everything in Oakmont, no case is ordinary or straightforward, such as helping the rich and strangely simian Robert Throgmorten track down his missing son, or investigating a faction of fish-like Innsmouthers whose generous food donations to starving citizens may hide an ulterior motive. Once again, Frogwares exhibits a deep understanding and appreciation for the source material, touching on many of the tenets of Lovecraftian horror while weaving its own unique tale.

You gather clues from various locations and crime scenes, and then piece them together through deductive reasoning to solve each mystery, much like the Sherlock Holmes games. You may find yourself with only a name or a scrap of a letter to go on, and it's up to you to figure out how to proceed. Perhaps searching through patient records at the hospital will give you another lead, or cross-referencing dates and locations in the local paper might turn up another witness. These player-driven puzzles and deductions are the heart of The Sinking City, and are just as entertaining and rewarding without the deerstalker and calabash pipe.

This time around, some of the deductions are also subjective, requiring you to make a call and live with the consequences. Is that character a cold-blooded murderer, or was he possessed by some cosmic horror (a real possibility in Oakmont) and not responsible for his actions? The consequences of your decisions aren't particularly far-reaching from a narrative perspective, but they are often memorable, and your inability to get through every case without getting your hands dirty fits with the grim world and themes. While Reed himself remains a bland and forgettable cypher, the evolving mystery behind Oakmont's curse and its eventual fate kept me engrossed for the long run.

While that world-building and atmosphere is where The Sinking City really shines, traveling around said world isn't as fun. Getting from one area of the city to the next is a time-consuming process, often requiring hopping between roads and boats to get where you're going. And you always have a lot of places to go; in addition to the aforementioned hospital and newspaper headquarters, you'll be visiting the police station, city hall, and library to drum up more leads, and it's not always clear which location you need to visit. Fast travel helps with this process, but it isn't particularly fast, requiring you to first find and run to a phone booth, then wait through a lengthy load time.

As you're traveling to various locations, eldritch monsters occasionally spring up, leading to survival-horror combat. Simply put, the stiff and sluggish gunplay is not fun, and frustrates more than it excites. However, the grotesque enemy creatures introduce an ever-present threat and tension that heighten the Lovecraftian world you're exploring. Ultimately, The Sinking City's combat is a necessary evil that I'm glad Frogwares included, even if its implementation leaves a lot to be desired.

The Sinking City shares all of the same problems of Frogwares' previous games, but it also capitalizes on the same strengths. Reed's cases offer up surprising twists and memorable moments, and flesh out a twisted world and cast of characters I enjoyed learning about. The combat and repetition may elicit the wrong kind of madness, but fans of Lovecraftian horror should still consider visiting The Sinking City.

» Jeff Marchiafava

Wolfenstein: Youngblood

Making the best of change

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** MachineGames, Arkane Studios **Release** July 26 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

MachineGames' mainline Wolfenstein titles have both taken risks, either endearing or repulsing gamers with a focus on challenging, resource-fraught gameplay as well as stories that glue together aching emotional trauma and slapstick pulp. Youngblood is a side story that opts for something different than what's come before, embracing spongier combat, skill trees, cosmetics, and even live-service aspects like daily challenges. These smart changes make Youngblood an immensely enjoyable co-op first-person shooter about bashing in Nazi skulls.

When we last left protagonist B.J. and the crew in Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus, they were leading a full-on revolution to take back America from its Nazi overlords. Now, nearly 20 years have passed. America is Nazi-free, Europe is not, and B.J. is missing. His teenage daughters, Jess and Soph, are searching for him in Paris, carrying out operations for the local resistance to beat back the fascist stranglehold over the city. At the start, you choose either sister, with an A.I. partner taking over the role of the other if you don't have a co-op partner. Who you choose is ultimately cosmetic, since each sister has access to the same skill tree, weapons, and stats-boosting emotes players can deploy to get out of tricky situations.

Youngblood plays like a conventional shooter on the surface, with you mowing down waves of Nazi foes as they rush, flank, and otherwise try to annihilate you. In this entry, enemies have health and armor bars you have to knock down, but once you start leveling up, you become every Nazi's worst nightmare. For every level, you gain an attack-power boost, as well as points to purchase nodes on your skill tree. These nodes range from maximum health boosters to powerful abilities like being able to tackle a foe with such force you reduce them to a human slushee. You can also collect coins to buy upgrades for your weapons, like scopes and barrels. I loved going off the beaten path in search of coins just to outfit my weapons with more doodads.

All of these options give you and your partner a lot of leeway when it comes to deciding how to tackle your problems. You can customize both your skills to let you play as stealthy ninjas capable of slitting throats for a bit before the violence goes loud, for example. The variety of choice make combat satisfying on a tactical level, and every weapon in your arsenal is fun, from your starting pistol to a laser rifle capable of disintegrating enemies. The number of tools at your disposal makes every combat encounter feel fresh all the way to the end.

Higher-tier enemies like massive robots roam the streets of Paris. To take down these baddies (and bosses) you have to work together, often with one player acting as bait to lure the enemy around while the other focuses fire on them. Throughout the 10-hour story campaign, I had several dramatic clutch moments, like when a partner blew up an entire squadron of Nazis surging on my position with a well-placed grenade. The co-op and coordination don't detract from Wolfenstein's combat; they enhance the best moments to great effect.

Youngblood's world is a series of open spaces like Dishonored (which is fitting given that Arkane Studios co-developed the game), with you and your squadmate unlocking districts around Paris that are filled with apartments, stores, guard outposts, and secret areas. You often have to think vertically to progress and reach your objectives, like hopping into a second-story apartment window to bypass a barricaded alleyway. My only gripe with the world is that sometimes the plentiful optional missions are clumsily designed for it, requiring constant fast travel to complete a few of them.

Youngblood excels as an entertaining shooter with the right kind of RPG elements and choices. However, when compared to the stellar and shocking storytelling of previous Wolfensteins, this entry comes up short. It has a few interesting breadcrumbs about what happened in the aftermath of Wolfenstein II, including the fates of a couple characters, but this outing is focused on the exploits of its dynamic duo. Jess and Soph are ultimately likeable goofballs, but they don't have any real character development. As someone who adores the saga MachineGames has constructed, I didn't mind the lack of an engaging story that much because Youngblood is such a generously entertaining romp.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Concept**
Take back Nazi-controlled Paris with a friend and a lot of guns

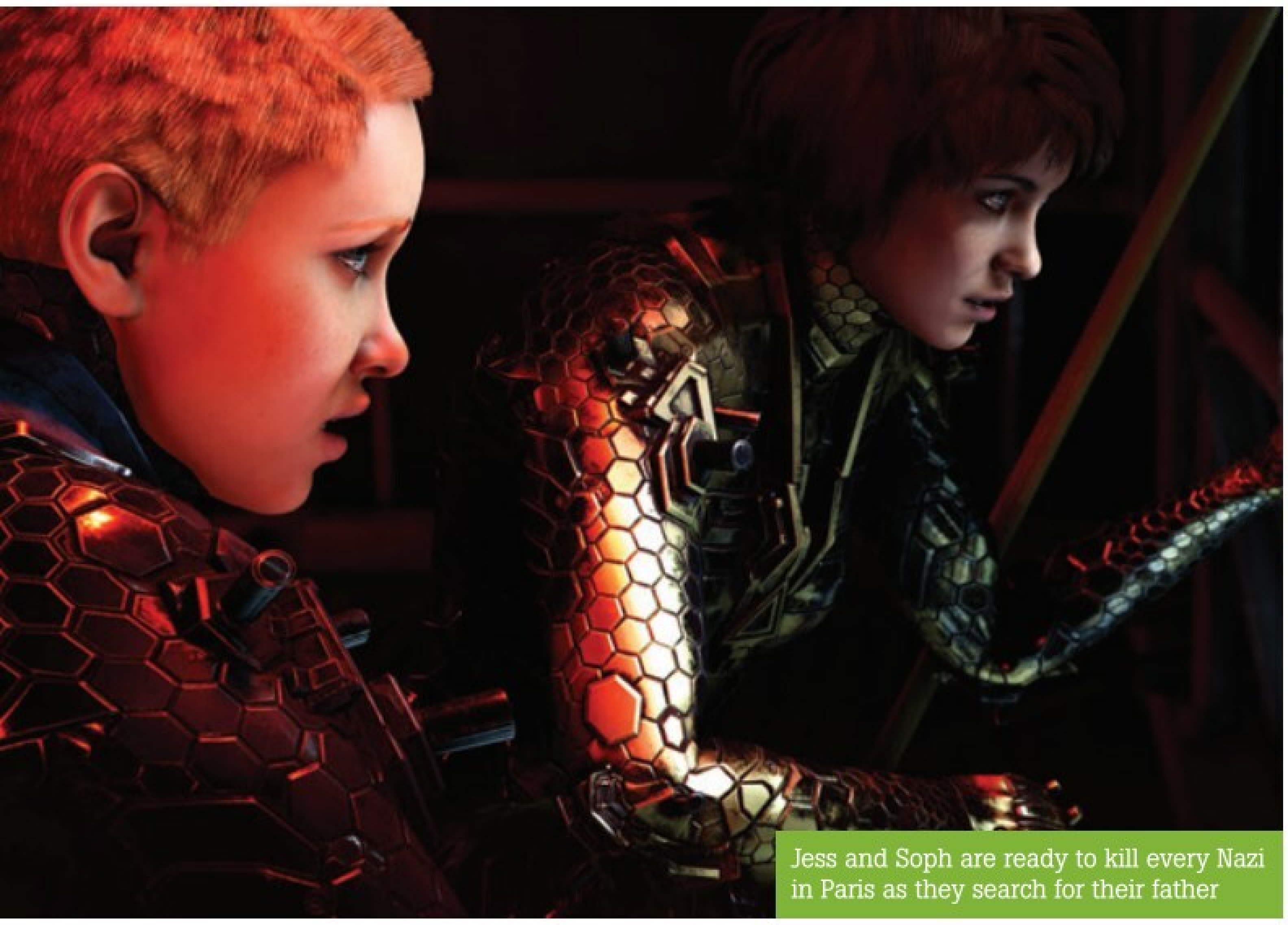
» **Graphics**
The environmental designs are the series' most colorful and eye-catching yet, from city districts to subterranean military bases. However, character animations are still noticeably stiff

» **Sound**
The soundtrack bounces back and forth between synthwave and heavy metal, providing a nice beat to battles large and small

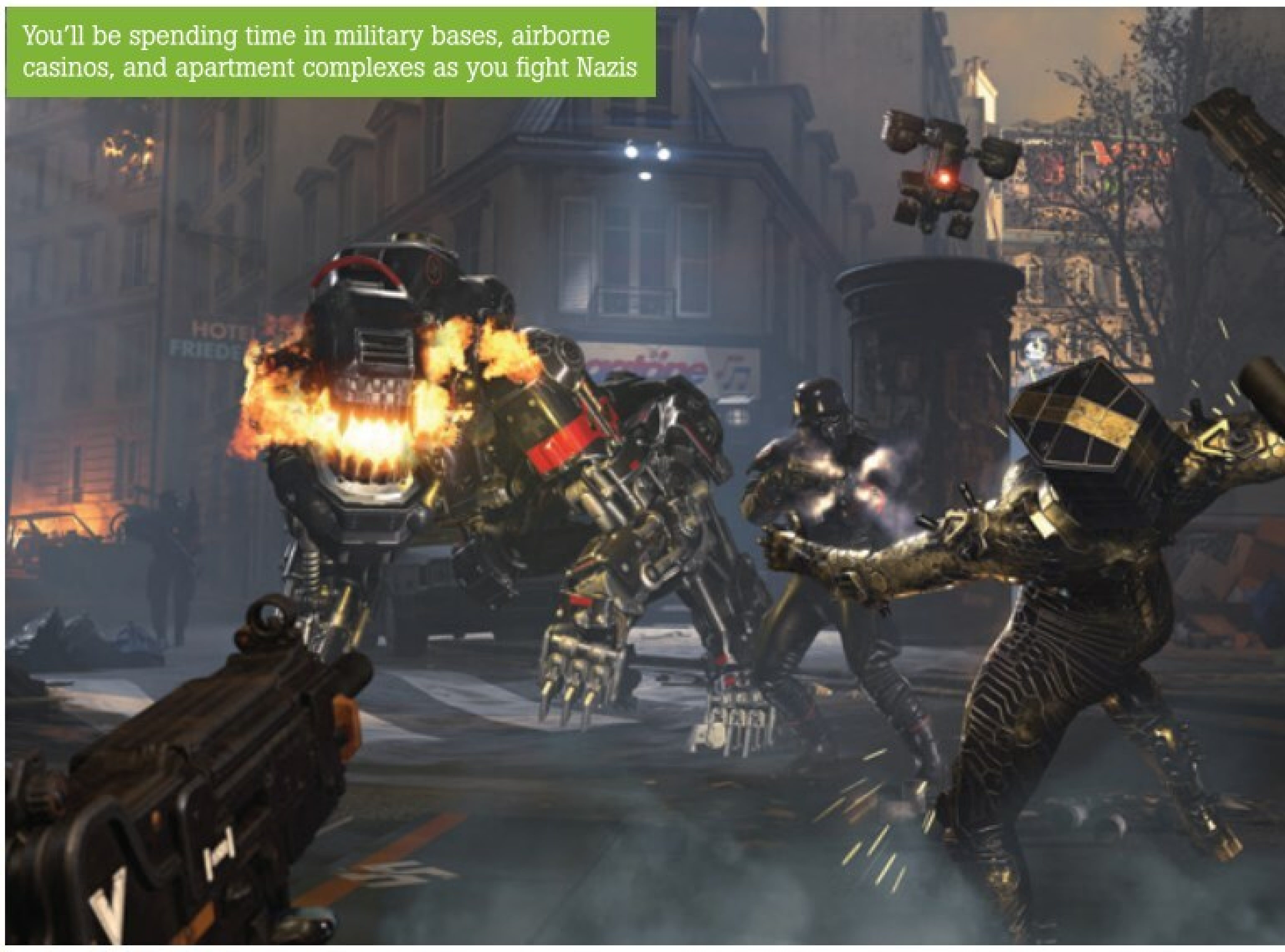
» **Playability**
Like previous Wolfenstein titles, Youngblood's systems and controls are easy to grasp

» **Entertainment**
This side chapter provides a steady drip of Nazi-massacring fun, especially if you have a pal along for the ride

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



Jess and Soph are ready to kill every Nazi in Paris as they search for their father



You'll be spending time in military bases, airborne casinos, and apartment complexes as you fight Nazis

Judgment

Cracking cases and skulls

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **Release** June 25 **Rating** M

PS4

» Concept
Use your detective skills to stop a serial murderer in a new game from the studio behind the Yakuza series

» Graphics
Kamurocho's familiar streets look as good as ever, and they're packed with detail

» Sound
You can listen to the story in either English or Japanese, with full dubs in both languages. Either way, the performances are solid

» Playability
Combat is engaging and responsive, but some of the detective-oriented tasks are clunky

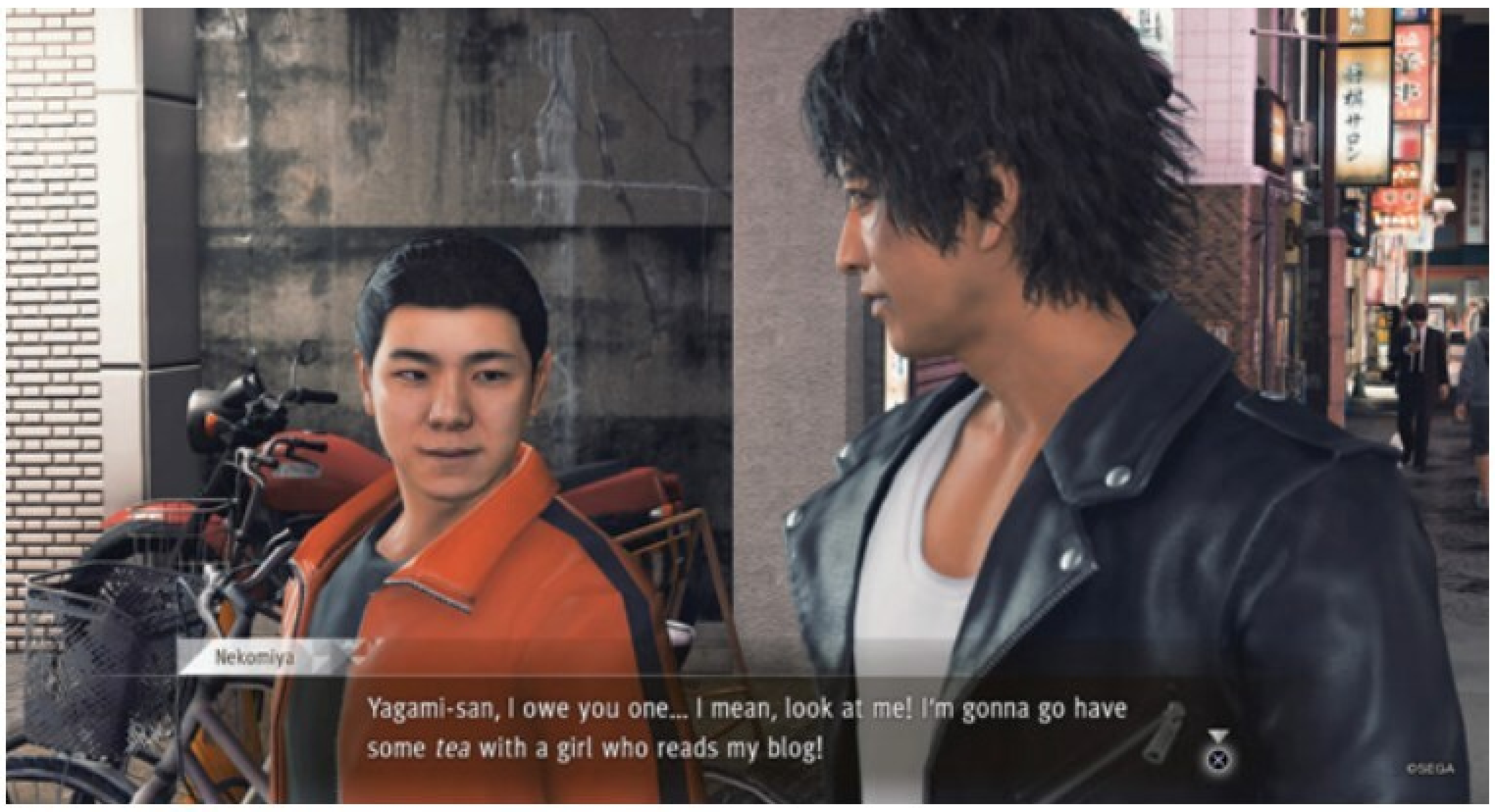
» Entertainment
Judgment is a Yakuza game in all but name, offering the same dizzying array of action, side content, and a lengthy (and convoluted) story

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Kamurocho is no stranger to violence, but a recent series of murders is unsettling even for the crime-riddled Tokyo neighborhood. In a particularly gruesome calling card, the killer gouges out the eyes of his victims. Thankfully, Takayuki Yagami is on the case. An attorney-turned-detective, he has the credentials and tenacity to bring justice where it's needed – no matter how far the investigation may take him. His methods might get results, but they're ultimately overshadowed by the strong story and engaging world-building.

Developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio is known for its Yakuza series, and Judgment is effectively a new Yakuza game in all but name. It takes place in the same place Kazuma Kiryu and company have called home for more than a decade, but the similarities don't end there. Animations, side activities, and other elements have been directly transferred over to this new title. The Yakuza franchise is great, but trying to keep track of its characters and plot (which span seven massive games) is like trying to sip from a fire hose. Judgment is a completely fresh narrative start that doesn't require – or even reward – previous Yakuza experience. All you need to know is that gangsters run this town, and the officials may be even bigger crooks.

Judgment's big bullet-point addition is how it leans into the detective fantasy. Yagami's agency is small, so he takes on a variety of mundane cases (such as tracking down missing items or an underpants-stealing creep) in addition to the larger, overarching murder investigation. That element is split into several main components, and some are stronger than others. The worst are the tailing missions, where you follow people without letting their suspicion meters fill. They're tedious and overlong, and they're also an unfortunately common part of investigations. Conceptually, I liked the parts where you examine crime scenes for hidden details, which you use to put together a hypothesis on what happened. The actual stakes are disappointingly low, however; you're free to blunder your way through the dialogue options with no penalties, aside from some embarrassed text responses a slight ding to your experience bonus. The real consequences happen in battle, oddly enough.



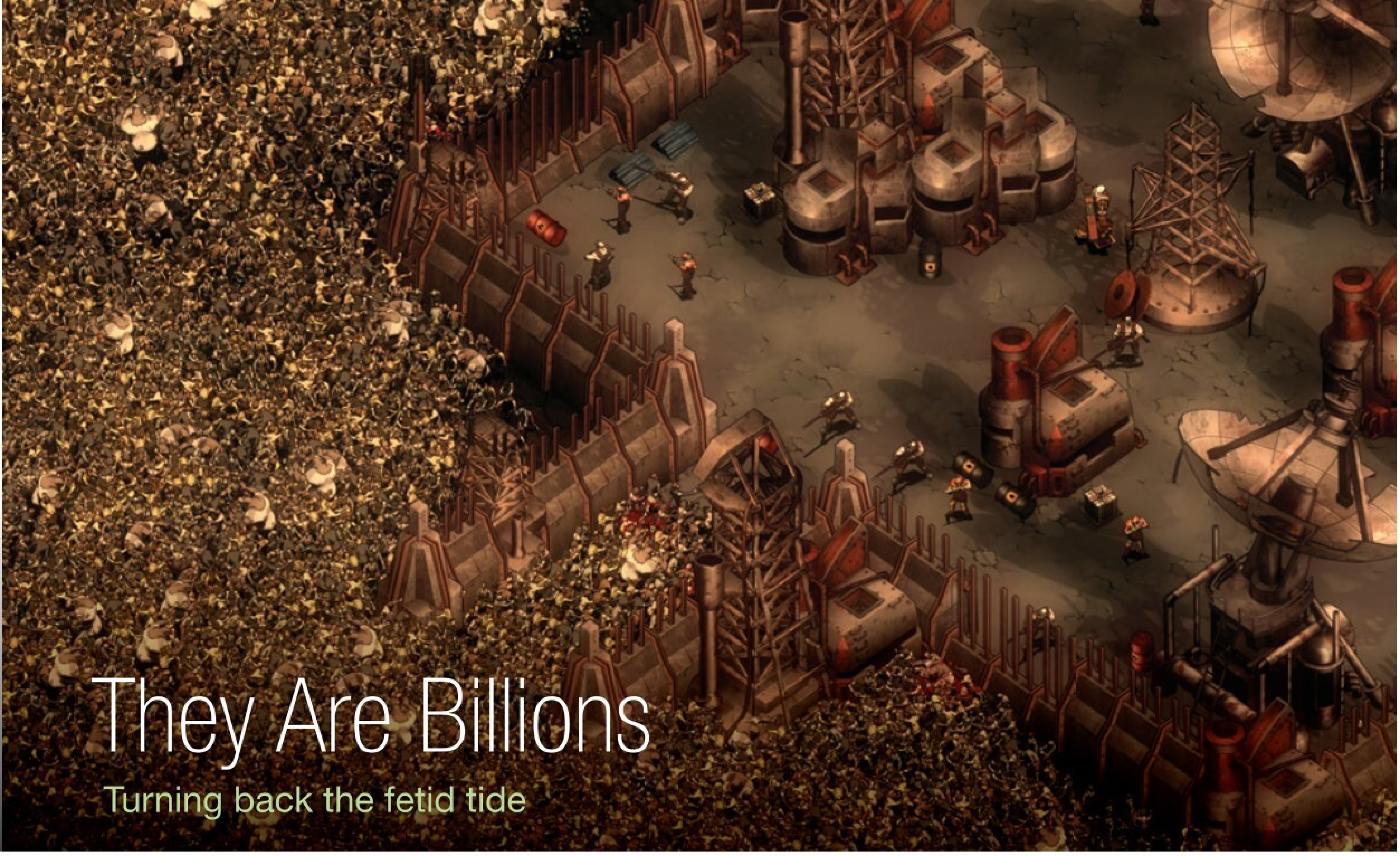
Nekomiya
Yagami-san, I owe you one... I mean, look at me! I'm gonna go have some *tea* with a girl who reads my blog!

©SEGA

Yagami might not be a member of a crime family, but that doesn't mean he's safe as a civilian. Even before getting involved in the deeper mystery, he's constantly getting hassled and attacked. Thankfully, he's a solid brawler, and beating down thugs is dependably fun. He has a couple of fighting styles at his disposal, so you can take out crowds with swooping crane attacks or lash out at individual opponents with his tiger form. Judgment adds a wrinkle to the familiar framework with the introduction of mortal wounds. Tougher enemies can wreak additional havoc on the player by targeting Yagami's lifebar. If these attacks are successful, your maximum health is sapped until you see a doctor or use a rare item. Both are expensive solutions, and it's quite possible to have neither one available during the frequent (and lengthy) set-piece encounters. It's an oddly punitive touch for a game that's so generous to players otherwise.

Kamurocho has plenty to offer when you're not busy tracking down criminals. The biggest side activity is drone racing, which gives Yagami something else to do with his toy beyond spying on people. I went all-in on the mode, completing optional missions to get the best possible parts, though you don't have to engage with racing if it's not your thing. I wasn't as excited about a lame virtual virtual-reality minigame, where you roll dice to maneuver on a weird life-sized playfield and get items for cash. That's in addition to the array of casino games, arcade games, and other diversions at your fingertips when you're ready to take a break.

Even though I wasn't in love with all of Yagami's investigatory tools, I had a great time seeing the Yakuza formula from a fresh perspective. Judgment tells a sprawling, action-packed story that veers dangerously close to melodrama without falling apart. It has some genuinely shocking moments, and proves that you don't need Kiryu or Majima as tour guides to have a great time in Kamurocho. » **Jeff Cork**



They Are Billions

Turning back the fetid tide

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Numantian Games **Developer** Numantian Games **Release** June 18 **Rating** T

Many days into your survival campaign, the restless undead await outside your fortifications. It's okay – you've prepared with a slew of stalwart defenses, snipers at the ready, and battlements to stave off any attack. The intruders come, banging on the gates, and you repel them all neatly. More are sure to arrive, but you have time to rebuild your resistance … or so you thought. With your gaze and efforts focused on the front line, a single zombie slipped through the cracks on your south wall and gained access to your hapless colonists. Because of that small oversight, a virulent outbreak ripples through your entire settlement, spreading from within and turning your own forces against you. In moments, your once-great city lies in ashes. What do you do? Start again, of course! This time, you'll be ready.

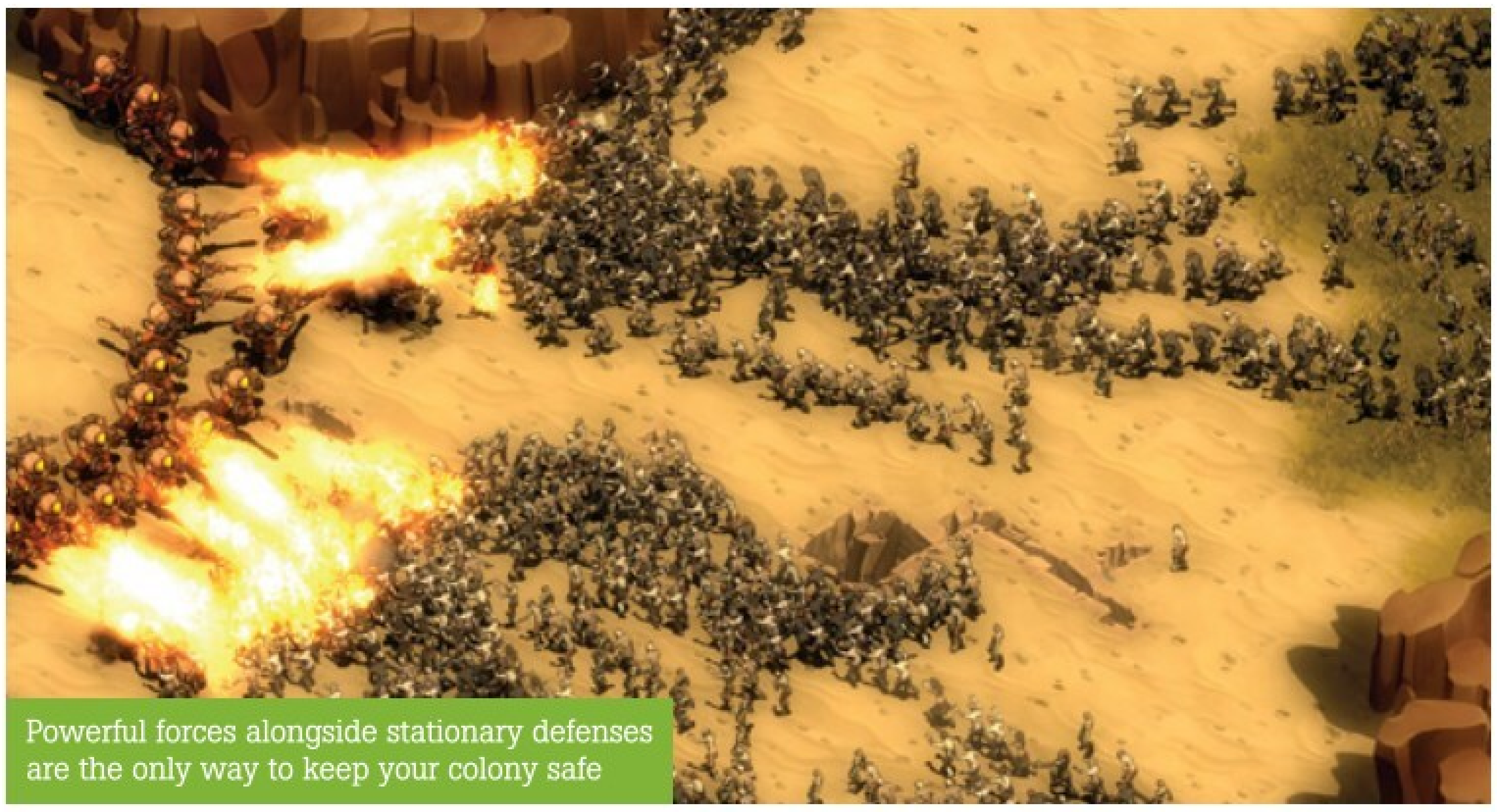
They Are Billions has a challenging, randomized loop that places you as master and commander of a fledgling city in a variety of environments. In this captivating cycle, you continually refine your old strategies and develop new ones to handle the threat of invasion. The survival mode is the core avenue of play – building up a thriving colony from scratch, teching up, and expanding to take on greater looming threats.

You have a variety of dials to tune before each game, allowing you to select the right difficulty for you, including how many days of preparation you have and how many undead (there aren't actually billions, but there are enough) you must stave off. The game can be challenging even with a modest amount of difficulty selected, and permadeath can leave a bitter taste in your mouth after spending hours working on an impenetrable bastion. But if you're like me, They Are Billions will make you hungry for even more punishment and perfection.

A wide variety of units and buildings are available as you expand, and every outing is a different-yet-delightful deluge of the dead. Raise an army of rangers and clockwork titans to complement defensive ballistas and shock towers as you move through the tech tree. Once you master fending off the standard shuffling and slow zombies, variable types get thrown into the mix, forcing you to prepare for speedy threats and colossal terrors. Most games become a delicate balancing act of expansion, economy, and military might; you must be careful not to overextend and put your expansive holdings at risk for a zombie incursion. Building up your fort is fun, even if your attempts end in failure most of the time.

The campaign mode is far less of a draw, featuring a slew of missions and several different styles of play, including "hero" sessions where your focus is on a single unit, but it takes a serious backseat to the survival experience. The missions are curated and often feature aspects that feel like they require trial and error to know where things happen, leading to an unsatisfying series of maps that are incredibly light on story. The campaign's lack of appeal is mostly forgivable given the vast replayability of the survival mode, but you shouldn't pick this game up in the hopes of a compelling story.

They Are Billions is an interesting mashup of classic RTS, tower defense, and survival that successfully conjures up that "one more game" feel, assuming you can persevere through countless defeats. » **Daniel Tack**



Powerful forces alongside stationary defenses are the only way to keep your colony safe

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Build a colony and survive against a horde of zombies in a real-time strategy experience

» Graphics
While not mind-blowing, the graphics do a nice job of showing the scale and scope of the denizens threatening to destroy all you've worked for

» Sound
Fun unit barks and atmospheric music keep things rolling nicely

» Playability
Anyone can pick up the key factors to survival after a few games, but console players should be wary about playing with a controller

» Entertainment
With permadeath and razor-sharp margins for error, the title caters to RTS veterans and survivalists hungry for challenge

» Replay Value
High

The Console Difference

At the time of this writing, the PS4 and Xbox One versions lack the campaign mode. While this isn't a huge detriment (the campaign is not the main draw), the control schemes are dire and unwieldy on a console controller. You can alleviate this by using a mouse and keyboard on your console setup, but your goal should be to experience the title on PC.

Score: 7

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order

Power at a cost

7

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Koei Tecmo/Team Ninja **Release** July 19 **Rating** T

Switch

» Concept
A super-powered brawl that delivers an impressive number of characters, but stumbles with story, progression, and level designs

» Graphics
The heroes and villains look like they were yanked right out of a comic book, and that's a good thing. The environments are light on details and destructible objects

» Sound
The score and character voices are all over the place. Some melodies are appropriately heroic, others sound like generic rock riffs. Some character voices are perfect, others sound forced

» Playability
The controls work well and make characters feel powerful and true to who they are (with some exceptions)

» Entertainment
The bland level designs and baffling character progression hold the action back and make it somewhat of a slog

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Thanos snapping his fingers to wipe out half of all life in the universe isn't the only threat the Avengers face in Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order. As they race to stop the mad titan from gathering all of the Infinity Gems, their journey is periodically upended by laborious and uneventful level designs, technical issues, odd balancing, and a story that sacrifices heart and soul to continually introduce new characters and locations. Even though the heroes get pummeled by the game's shortcomings, they still stand tall and deliver plenty of fun when combat intensifies.

Players begin by controlling the Guardians of the Galaxy. This rag-tag group does a nice job of illustrating the diversity in character powers and approaches. Star-Lord can fly around and rain down laser fire from high, while Gamora uses her sword to slice foes at close range. All of the characters control admirably, with the mobility you would expect from them. Whether you are playing single player or four-player co-op, the combat in these early moments is enjoyable and dynamic, pushing you to look for openings and communicate with other players to line up tag-team synergy attacks.

Combat is similar to the previous Ultimate Alliance games – you do a lot of jamming on the same attack buttons to keep waves of enemies at bay and use special powers strategically to thin their numbers. This simplicity works well, but don't expect to see much destruction in the environments other than flying bodies. Whether you are in Avengers Tower or Wakanda's wilderness, most of the environments are sterile, repetitive in architectural design, and hardly anything in them can be destroyed.

The lack of a connection developed to the world, both through gameplay and visually, hurts the experience more than I thought it would. Levels get repetitive fast, and the periodic puzzles that are thrown in to change up the pace are just annoying speed bumps that halt progress.

If you thought *Avengers: Endgame*'s hero roster was awesome in size, Ultimate Alliance 3's is even bigger, and thoroughly explores several sectors from Marvel's sprawling universe. The playable characters consist of over 30 well-known faces, and not just from the Avengers portfolio. The X-Men, Spider-Verse, Marvel Knights, and Midnight Sons are represented in big ways. The best part of the game is seeing who will pop up next, even if it is just for a brief cameo. The reveals are strong from start to finish.

Most of the characters are handled well, giving you a range of powers that fit their personas. The Hulk is the rampaging mess you would expect, Deadpool is a powerful goofball, and Nightcrawler is constantly "bamfing" all over the place. Some characters are a little phoned in, however. Doctor Strange basically has the same flame attack as Ghost Rider. Most of the hero abilities are brought to life with an array of particle effects and graphics – often too many. Just keeping track of where the characters are onscreen can be difficult, especially when the camera switches to distant perspectives (which makes handheld play a little rough at times). The camera can be a serious pain.

As joyous as the character reveals are, adding yet another face to your roster can be somewhat maddening given how difficulty is balanced. Characters you don't use won't gain experience or level up. You just have to give up on most characters, as many will be under-leveled for the next mission. You can't just say "I want to play Spider-Man" and expect that experience to be fun if he's level 8 in a level 30 zone.

Though you can replay levels, the fastest way to level up heroes is to give your character an immediate shot of XP from a cube, which you can find hidden in levels or earn by completing specific tasks like the Infinity Trials, which don't offer new content, and instead take you through previously completed challenges with slightly different parameters, such as only being able to use Captain America.

My time with Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 was filled with peaks and valleys. It has great moments where everything is clicking, followed by lulls where it all falls apart. The story never really gets going, but is a fun exploration of all things Marvel. This experience is all about the character reveals and getting to test them out, even if the worlds they explore and challenges within them often lack excitement.
» Andrew Reiner

Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Head of the class

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems, Koei Tecmo **Release** July 26 **Rating** T

Fire Emblem has always been about going to war and managing comrades along the way. Making the necessary sacrifices on the battlefield while minimizing these losses is the series' heart and soul, but Fire Emblem: Three Houses goes even further, providing the ability to shape and mentor allies. You play as a professor trying to guide and prepare students for the cruelty of the world; their successes and failures hit hard, and you hope you've imparted the right wisdom and focused your students in the right areas of study. This is how Three Houses entrenches you in the role of a mentor, inserting you directly into student life, which enhances the experience in a memorable way.

Everything feels personal in Three Houses, from selecting a house to deciding what side you favor in the unfolding political war. Your house choice shapes the experience, much like the allegiances in the Harry Potter series. Every house has a unique roster of students who represent the noble and commoner classes alike, and your guidance can help them grow in their social interactions and in battle. These students have their own backgrounds that have shaped who they are, and watching them grow is a highlight, but it can also be downright devastating. After all, you can only provide wisdom, and sometimes they need to make their own mistakes.

You become immersed in all aspects of your students' lives. You pair up which students you want to bond on and off the battlefield by doing things like sharing a meal, giving them gifts, or inviting them to tea. You even have control over their lessons for the skills and classes you want to foster. The only time the game strikes out with this aspect is when it gives you the option to romance your students, which feels creepy. I preferred when my students would build their bonds in combat and it more naturally turned intimate between them.

When you're not teaching or hanging around the school, you're on the battlefield helping your students grow their skills so they can take their exam to advance their chosen class. Fire Emblem is still a strategy/RPG through and through, which means every character has a limited movement radius and you must pick the best placement for them each turn. The biggest change is Three Houses' removal of the classic-but-strict weapon triangle. Your weapon choice is still important, but damage is determined by the enemy type you're facing (such as heavy armor or flying) and what material they're most susceptible to, rather than a basic rock-paper-scissors setup.

I like this system because it encourages you to constantly weigh your options. Some weapons and skills are better suited for certain situations and a wrong move could be costly, especially if you have permadeath enabled. I also appreciate other new elements that help avoid frustrating deaths, like a limited-use ability to rewind time that reverses mistakes without reloading. Similarly, the new battalion mechanic lets you reinforce characters with hired soldiers, which improves your odds against bigger threats.

The battlefields themselves get repetitive, and I was disappointed to see the creativity in terms of terrain diminish as the game goes on. Even so, the thrill of watching your students get stronger and obtain new skills is hard to top, especially as you see the rate of their criticals rise. A memorable final battle gives you a place to prove your combat prowess as it pulls out all the stops, from traps to heaps of enemies filling your screen, giving you a fun opportunity to overcome the odds.

Three Houses has plenty of mysteries to uncover, and despite some predictable twists, you get big payoffs from the relationships you build. The story has shades of gray that pervade branching story paths, and the consequences of your choices are rarely clear-cut. I kept multiple save files and experimented with two of the houses, and while I only played Edelgard's arc to completion, I saw a lot of variation between the houses and narrative branches. I was surprised at how quickly I wanted to load up a new game after completing the 55-hour main campaign, and was impressed at how different each experience feels.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses is ambitious, and takes more chances than previous entries in the series. The way it lets your role as professor play into both the narrative and gameplay is nothing short of fantastic. This is the most I've ever cared about my Fire Emblem characters, and that's incredibly high praise.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

9.5

Switch

» **Concept**
Pick a group of students to lead through political turmoil while solving mysteries about your hero's origin

» **Graphics**
The anime art style and beautifully illustrated cutscenes look fantastic. Just don't expect the environments to pack the same punch

» **Sound**
Great voice acting and a solid soundtrack both help enhance moments, but some of the music gets repetitive

» **Playability**
Smooth controls and easy-to-grasp mechanics provide a low barrier to entry for newcomers. Features like an ability to turn back time in case you make a bad move with a turn help, too

» **Entertainment**
Fire Emblem: Three Houses combines fun social elements and tense strategy combat wonderfully, making it hard to put down

» **Replay Value**
High

Sky: Children Of The Light

The next logical leap

8.5

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** thatgamecompany **Developer** thatgamecompany **Release** July 18 **Rating** 12+

iOS

» Concept
Fly through the clouds of a gorgeous world while making friends to soar by your side in this follow-up to Journey

» Graphics
Swirling clouds, distant light beams, and the ruins of a lost civilization are all depicted in a soft and inviting art style, but occasional hitching on some supported devices can break the illusion

» Sound
A stellar score ebbs and flows with the beats of onscreen events, while ambient sound effects add a naturalistic and meditative vibe

» Playability
Challenges in touch-screen control mar an otherwise accessible experience that features a smooth curve of new ideas and difficulty

» Entertainment
thatgamecompany's eye for aesthetic beauty and meaning-laden interactions are made richer through social engagement and sharing with friends

» Replay Value
High

Sky: Children of the Light is a deeper experience, both figuratively and literally, than it first appears to be. Sky directly echoes many of the beats and gameplay moments that defined Journey, thatgamecompany's last major release. But where Journey flirted with social elements, Sky is a full-on love affair with cooperative multiplayer. Early hours suggest a contemplative and accessible trip through an ethereal land of whirling clouds and distant horizons. While Sky can undoubtedly offer a thoughtful solo adventure akin to the studio's previous work, it's through engagement with friends and strangers that it becomes far more involved. Shaped by both mechanics and storytelling, it becomes a game about sacrifice, sharing, and the nature of altruism.

As one of the titular children of light, you are born into a world of interconnected realms linked beneath the same starry sky, and you must find ancestral spirits in order to return them to their rightful place in the constellations. By skipping across meadows, sliding down dunes, and soaring through open skies, you complete your task by bringing light to darkened places, kindling braziers and ancient bell towers with the touch of your candle. Gameplay is freeform and uncomplicated, and puzzles are often as simple as connecting the dots from one point to another. Lost spirits/stars are frequently hidden, so keen observation is required. Your life, light, and flight power are all encompassed in one shared statistic known as winged light, and it grows stronger as you find more of the lost. The sense of progression is satisfying, but the need to divert and collect new wing segments sometimes distracts from the natural flow of play.

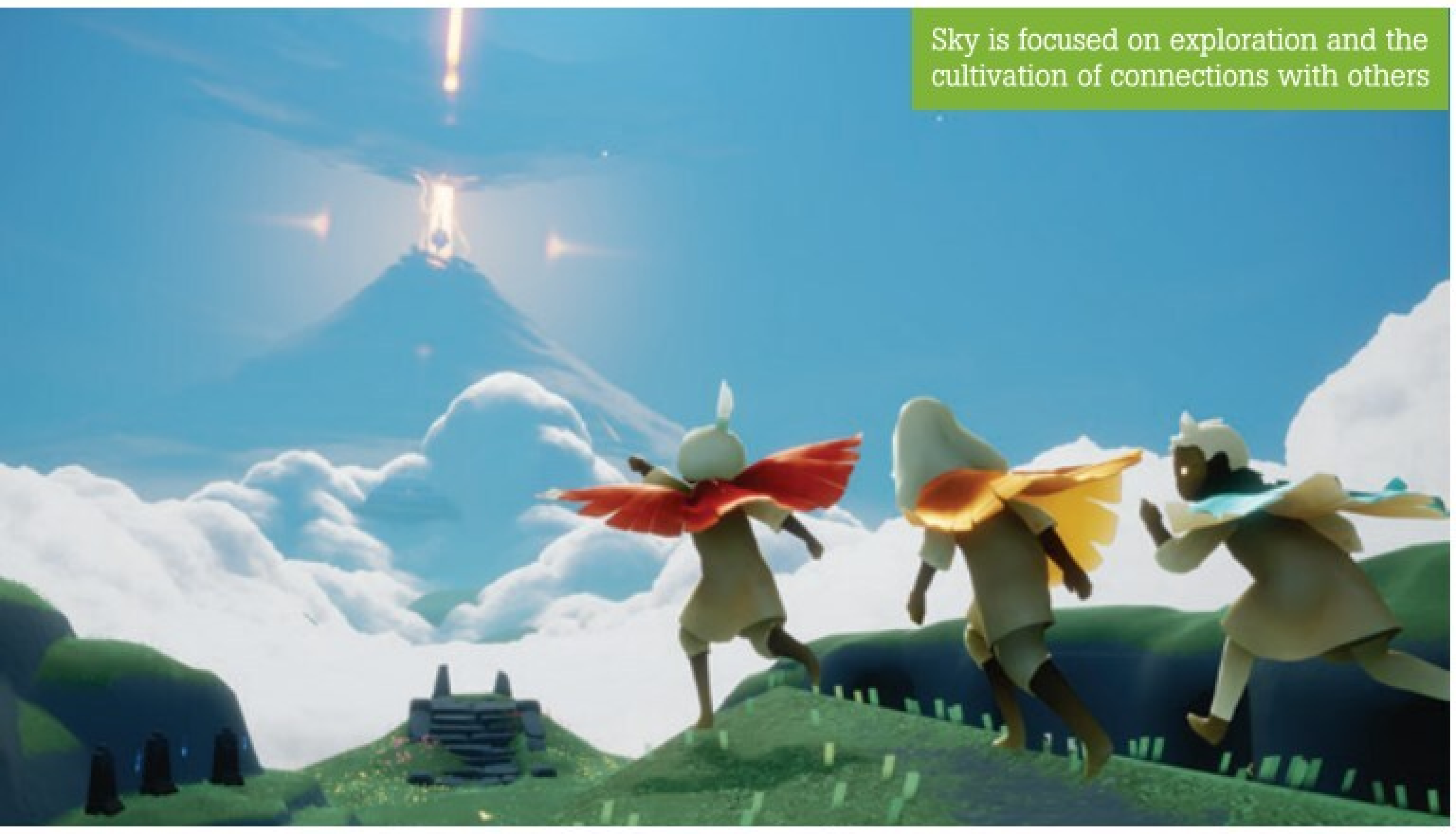
Each of the seven different realms offers a distinct visual and gameplay experience. The pastoral Daylight Prairie, with its inviting green fields and cumulus clouds, gives way to the rain-soaked Hidden Forest, which steals your light if you don't find cover. Moving between the shifting landscapes is satisfying and well-paced; the music and environments together paint a potent mental and emotional scene. The most impressive magic on each stage is how much is hidden away, waiting to be discovered on subsequent playthroughs; greater flight power and the presence of friends opens up entirely new areas to ascend through and explore, lending a satisfying sense of mastery.

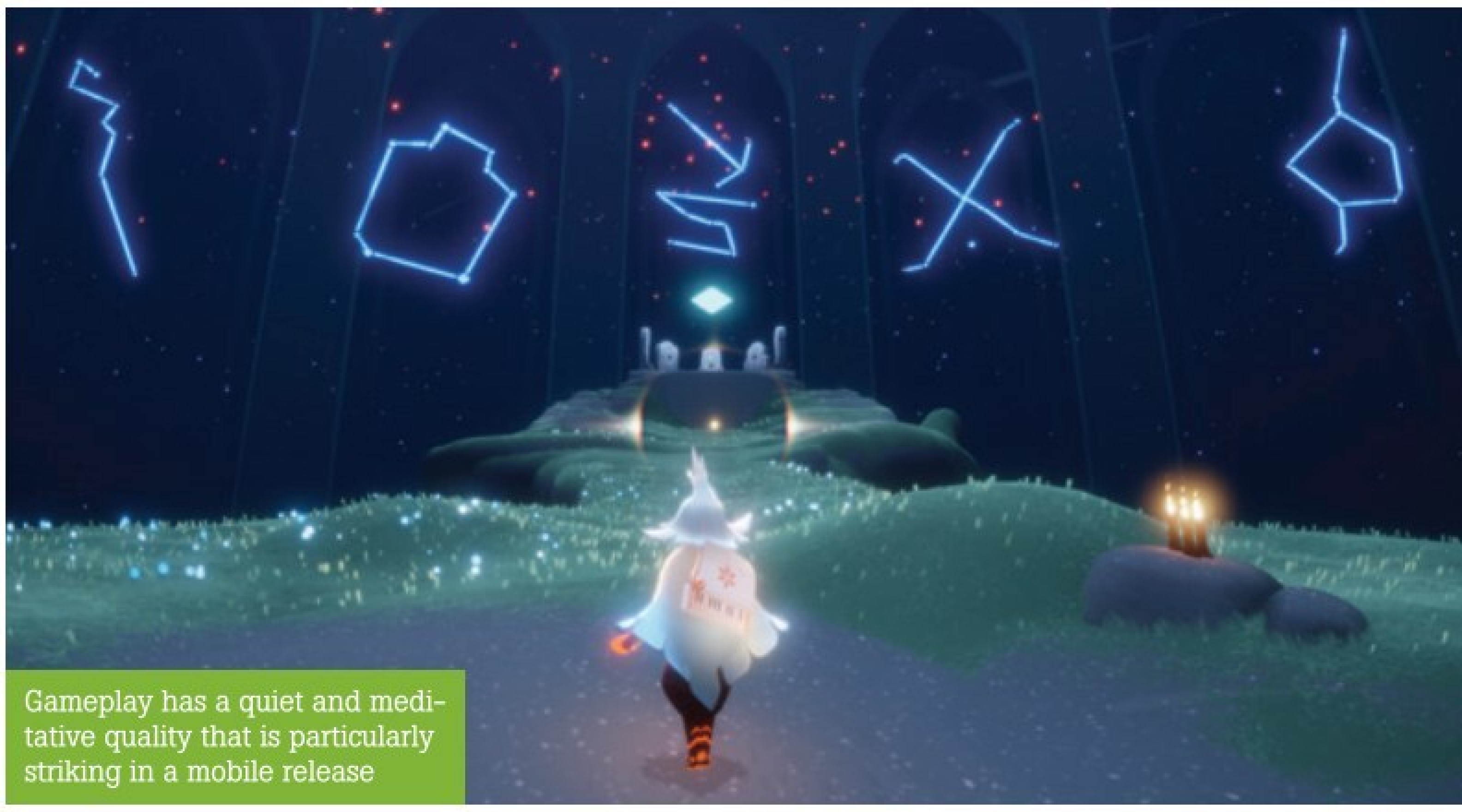
Whether you invite friends or meet up with strangers, Sky is a social game fueled by positive interactions. Dozens of emotive expressions unlock as you meet new NPC spirits, but the most popular within the burgeoning community are ones like "hug" or "high five." Players are encouraged to share light and hearts to new friends, boosting their progress to new cosmetics. Musical instruments and sheet music can be acquired, to pause from the action and play together. Up to eight players can hold hands and leap into the sky together, guided by a single leader to discover new destinations – an ideal way to share the game with a child or less-experienced player. Some non-critical-path doorways and tasks in the world require multiple players to unlock, encouraging shared exploration. I really enjoy playing with friends, and I've had some magical moments meeting strangers in the wild and working to solve a problem. I only wish the direct invite functionality was a bit more straightforward instead of a strange QR code system.

Thatgamecompany makes a valiant attempt to wrangle the touch screen into a usable twin-stick setup for 3D navigation in air and on ground, but it's only successful for simple tasks. More precise movement, platforming, and flight challenges don't fare as well; I often struggled against the controls, or fell off a narrow ledge when I thought I was standing still. This interface is by no means a dealbreaker, but it can lead to moments of frustration in an otherwise idyllic game.

As free-to-play games go, Sky is far less predatory or immersion-breaking than many competitors on iOS, but it still has an in-game store that can speed your acquisition of new items. Amassing that same currency in-game can be slow, but faster if you choose to share light with friends, and they with you. Sky is built as a living game, and the hauntingly beautiful conclusion leads naturally into endless potential replays. If that replay is appealing, the developer has seasonal content planned, with new spirits to find and items to earn, which will also come at an additional price.

Sky expands on the successful gameplay ideas of the developer's previous games, but with a greater sense of progression, replayability, and a far more involved social component. Conceptually, this new project is a deeply felt meditation on empathy and the connections between people, couched in the same unpretentious and thoughtful presentation we've come to expect from the studio. Sky is a refreshingly moving and robust game on the iOS platform, and one best shared with others – especially folks who might not normally pick up a video game. » **Matt Miller**


Sky is focused on exploration and the cultivation of connections with others


Gameplay has a quiet and meditative quality that is particularly striking in a mobile release

Dr. Mario World

A spoonful of sugar

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Puzzle (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** July 10 **Rating** 4+, E

8.75

iOS • Android

» **Concept**
Reimagine Mario's pill-focused puzzler by turning it on its head and adding a host of creative new mechanics

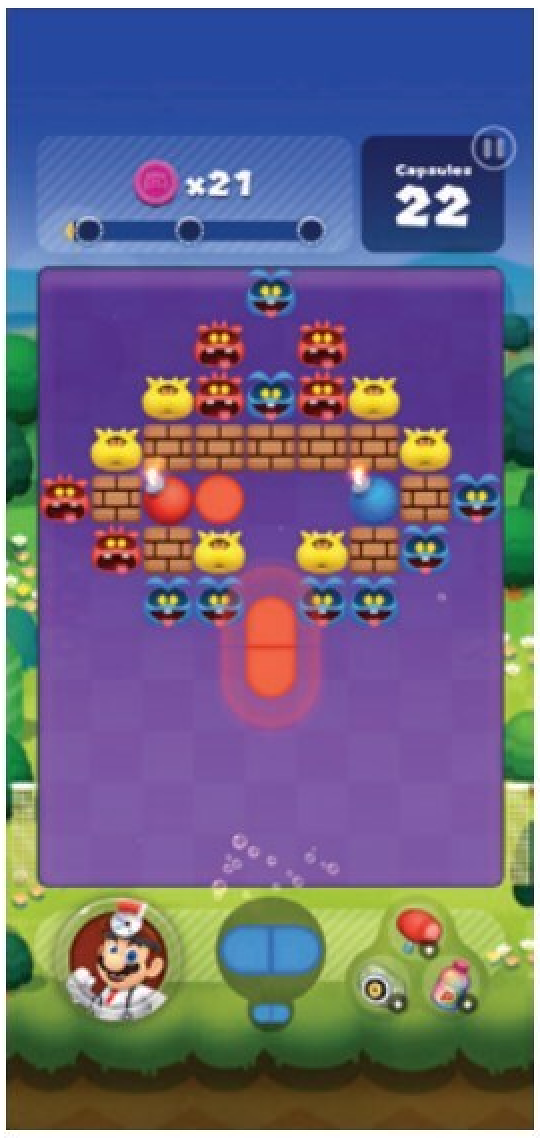
» **Graphics**
The art is cutesy and simple, but it gets the job done

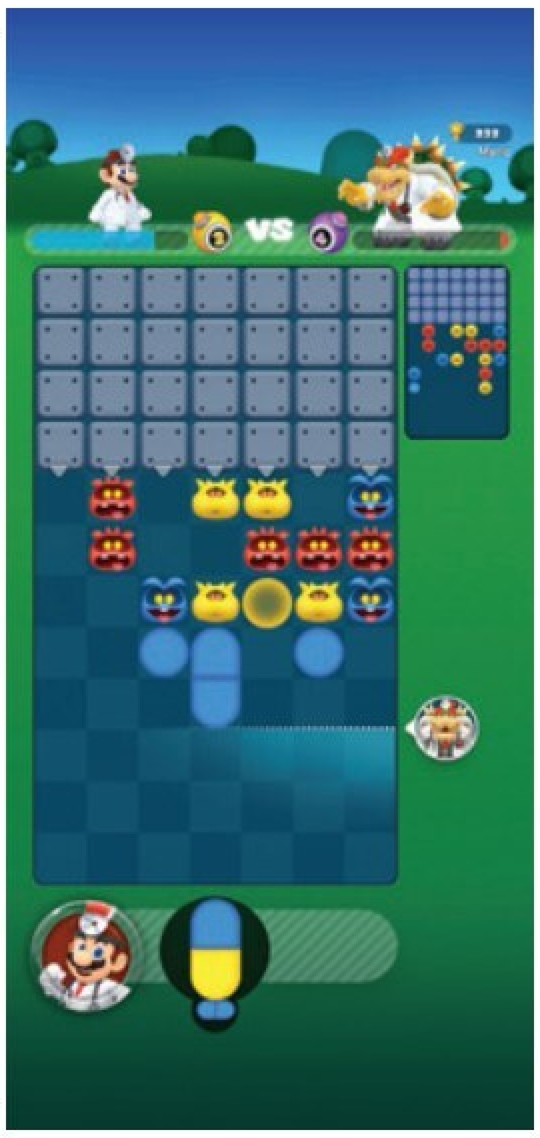
» **Sound**
Most of the music is catchy, but the new stuff is nowhere near as memorable as the classics "Fever" and "Chill," which have been remixed here

» **Playability**
Dr. Mario has always been simple to pick up and play, but this mobile incarnation makes it even easier to drag pills around the screen with only a finger

» **Entertainment**
Dr. Mario World's new mechanics add a lot of strategic elements to the classic formula, but the series remains as engaging as ever

» **Replay Value**
High





Tetris gets the most love of all the Game Boy puzzle games, but when Dr. Mario released on Nintendo's portable system in 1990, it chewed through its fair share of batteries. Nintendo has revisited its virus-crushing puzzle game several times over the years, but now that the series has migrated to mobile devices, Nintendo has flipped the concept on its head. Now pills slowly float toward the top of the screen, but this is only the first of many new features that make Dr. Mario World one of the most notable entries in the series.

Like previous incarnations of Dr. Mario, you eliminate all viruses in a stage by matching them to rows of multi-colored pills. In World, you get to choose how many pills to toss out and when, and you can hold onto pills after you've thrown them to prevent them from moving. I appreciated this new slower pace, which allows plenty of time to plan an attack. At the same time, Dr. Mario World still offers frantic moments; after making a match, you can move any free-floating pill pieces and use them to make new matches, and the resulting scrambles are exhilarating as you work quickly to make the most out of your limited stock.

Dr. Mario World currently contains five worlds and more than 200 total levels, and I was pleasantly surprised at how the action evolves. In some stages, viruses are frozen in ice and require a couple of hits before they disappear, while other viruses are locked in cages and can't be destroyed until you break the lock on another area of the screen. A few stages even shift your focus away from the viruses and ask you to smash blocks to find hidden coins. As Nintendo mixes and matches all these elements, Dr. Mario World begins to feel less like a puzzle game and more like a strategy game, but that isn't a bad thing. I loved calculating which viruses or objects I needed to attack first and then setting up combos as I crossed my fingers and waited with baited breath for the right colored pill to come my way.

While Dr. Mario remains the title character, he's now joined by a bigger cast of doctors and assistants. Every doctor has their own unique abilities. For example, Dr. Mario can eradicate the lowest row of viruses on the board, while Dr. Toad eliminates both viruses and pills at 10 random locations. Assistants provide smaller buffs, such as boosting your score or giving you a small percentage chance of eliminating a few viruses at the start of a stage. You can bring one doctor and two assistants into any stage; their abilities are incredibly useful, and making good use of them means the difference between victory and defeat.

Unfortunately, some of the additions to this mobile version aren't welcome. Dr. Mario World is a free-to-play game, which means the monetization is baked into the gameplay. Hearts are a currency you must spend to play a level. If you beat the level, you get that heart back. Otherwise, they replenish at the rate of one every 30 minutes. If you're playing well, you can continue without consequence. But if you get hung up on a level or have a string of bad plays, you are forced to stop and wait for your hearts to refresh. Of course, you are encouraged to refill those hearts by spending real money on gems, which earn you more hearts. Gems can also be used to give you more time or pills on harder levels, or redeemed for new doctors and assistants. I'm disappointed that even Dr. Mario isn't hardy enough to stave off this kind of microtransaction infection, but I only ran out of hearts a handful of times, and I never felt like the pay mechanics were too aggressive.

Even if you do run out of hearts, you can always play in Versus mode and pit your virus-crunching skills against other players online. This mode features all the same color-matching mechanics from single player, but as you match viruses you have the opportunity to attack your opponent by throwing viruses onto their screen. This mode is a nice diversion, and I was happy to be able to play the game when I'd run out of hearts, but I spent most of my time in the single-player worlds.

Despite the monetization method, Dr. Mario World is a fun puzzle game, and the World moniker signifies that this is more than just another Dr. Mario remix. This is the most dramatic reinvention of Dr. Mario since the series' inception, and I often had trouble putting my phone down before the battery ran dry. Nintendo plans to update this game with new levels down the road, so this is one flu season I look forward to revisiting.

» **Ben Reeves**

the score

8.75 F1 2019

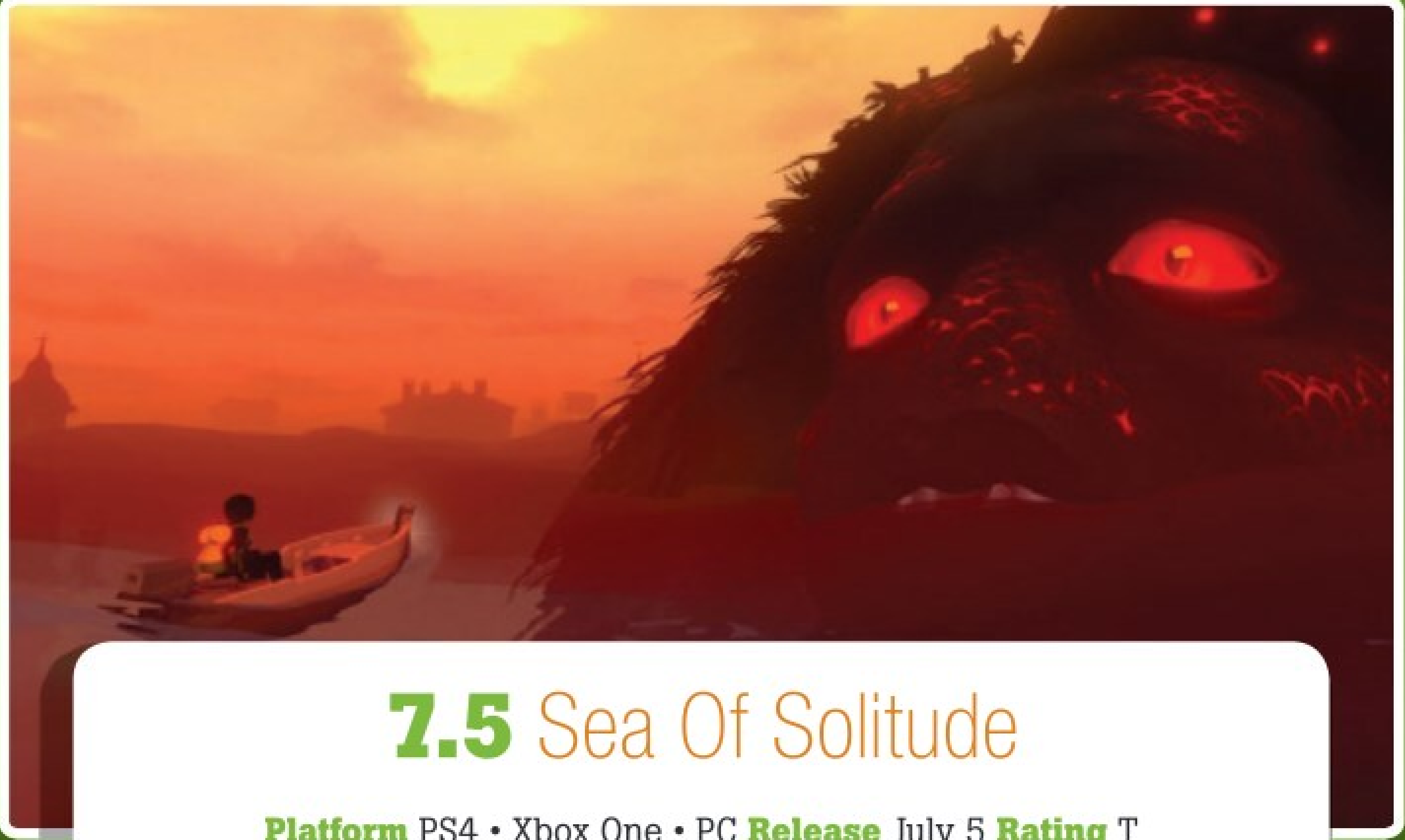
Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release June 28 **Rating** E

You should play F1 2019 not just because you're an F1 fan or the hottest thing that's ever gotten in a cockpit. Do it because you want to experience the thrill, the heartbreak, and the satisfaction of competing at ridiculously high speeds.
– Matthew Kato

8.5 Mordhau

Platform PC **Release** April 29
Rating NR

The joy of mastering Mordhau's challenging system and the memorable moments of violent ballet make these engrossing battles unique. – Javy Gwaltney



7.5 Sea Of Solitude

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** July 5 **Rating** T

Sea of Solitude provides an insightful look at how mental health devastates the lives of not just those it affects, but also loved ones on the outside. Protagonist Kay learns a lot about herself by understanding the value of listening, coming to term with her flaws, and not just empathizing with family but also accepting that a simple fix isn't always possible. – Elise Favis

6 My Friend Pedro

Platform Switch • PC **Release** June 20 **Rating** T

I wish my time with My Friend Pedro had been more about losing myself in the frenzy of its action and less about navigating a tiresome control scheme.
– Javy Gwaltney

7.75 Samurai Shodown

Platform PS4 • Xbox One **Release** June 25 **Rating** M

If you're not keen on learning by jumping into the fray and taking your lumps, Samurai Shodown likely won't do much for you. But when there's another player facing you down, its bouts offer a fantastic mix of fighting disciplines. It's accessible, nuanced, and flashy, and the ways it asks you to bet big to win make matches as exciting as they are tense.
– Suriel Vazquez

7 Harry Potter: Wizards Unite

Platform iOS • Android
Release June 21 **Rating** 9+

When Wizards Unite is trying to do something new, it can be good fun. Most of the content sadly ends up feeling like a strange version of Pokémon Go, giving players flimsy reasons to catch or zap 'em all.
– Andrew Reiner

6 Stranger Things 3: The Game

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release July 4 **Rating** T

The combat doesn't ask much of the player and the mission structure underwhelms. If you want to experience the events of Stranger Things' third season, you're better off sticking to the source material.
– Kyle Hilliard

5.5 SolSeraph

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release July 10 **Rating** E

Though it bears no official connection to ActRaiser, SolSeraph uses similar gameplay in an attempt to continue its legacy. However, this modern take on a decades-old formula is so boring and repetitive that it crumbles under the weight of the torch it's trying to carry.
– Joe Juba

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gameinformer Volume XXIX ◦ Number 9 ◦ Issue 317

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A GAMING BROTHERHOOD

The tragic history of Brøderbund, the original home of Prince of Persia and Myst

Doug and Gary Carlston didn't know how to run a video game publishing company; they had to figure it out as they went. Despite their ignorance, the two brothers built a publishing powerhouse responsible for some of the most successful and influential computer games of the '80s and early '90s, including Lode Runner, Prince of Persia, Myst, and Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? But just when Brøderbund was at the height of its power, the industry began to change.

This is the story of how two brothers from Eugene, Oregon, hustled their way into the video game industry and how their empire collapsed around them.

by Ben Reeves

Building A Galactic Empire

In the late '70s, Doug Carlston abandoned a lucrative career as a lawyer to pursue his passion for programming. On evenings and weekends, Doug had designed a trilogy of sci-fi strategy games under the banner Galactic Empire. They were the kinds of games not many people were making in those days, and the young programmer knew they were good. What he didn't know was how to sell them. So he called his brother.

Gary Carlston, meanwhile, was between jobs. For a few years, Gary had coached girls' basketball in Sweden. Then he made a living helping organize walkathons for The March of Dimes. He had almost zero experience in marketing or selling products, but when his brother offered to help pay the rent if Gary could sell some Galactic Empire games, Gary jumped on the phone and started cold-calling electronics stores. On his first try, Gary sold $300 worth of his brother's games. "I thought, well this is easy!" Gary remembers. Unfortunately, it was about to get a lot harder.

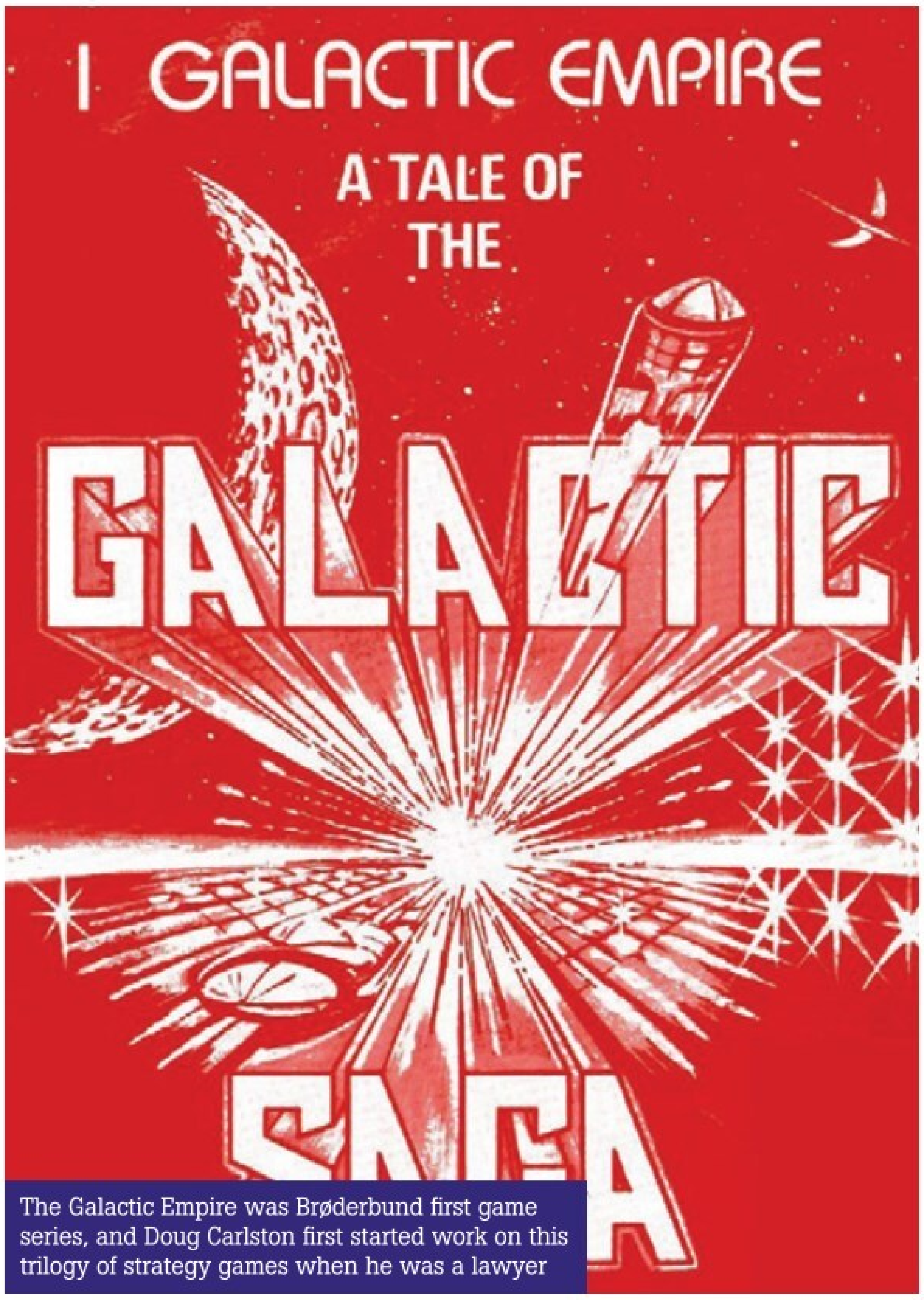
The two brothers scrounged together $8,000 in savings to start a company and filed for a business license under the name Brøderbund. The title was based on a band of intergalactic traders in Galactic Empire, which in turn was based on the word for brotherhood in Afrikaans. In order to avoid any association with the South African white-supremacist organization, Broederbond, the Carlstons altered the spelling and changed the "O" to a computer zero. Both brothers agreed Doug would be Brøderbund's first president and Gary would be its CEO. Their titles sounded important, but they knew they were meaningless if they couldn't sell more games.

Over the course of a few months, Gary discovered his first sales call had been a fluke. Video game stores didn't exist in 1980, and big-box retailers often didn't carry computer games. For weeks on end, Gary drove up and down the West Coast pitching homebrew strategy games and his brother's accounting software to mom-and-pop electronics shops. After six months, he had only made $500, which barely covered his gas expenses. By this point, the brothers had big dreams of becoming a software publisher, but they were burning through their savings and had started to max out their credit cards.

"We got pretty close to zero, and we didn't eat very often," Doug says. "My parents were university professors, so going into business was not something that they thought very highly of. They kept wondering when we were going to do something useful with our lives."

Land Of The Rising Fun

During the early 1980s, the brothers decided to make one last big push for success. While at the West Coast Computer Faire in San Francisco, they realized there was an untapped market in the U.S. for Japanese coin-op games. Japan's gaming industry was on the rise, and the Carlstons figured that someone could make a lot of money porting Japan's best arcade games to PC. The Carlstons wanted to be those someones. The brothers didn't have contacts in Japan, so they came up with a last-ditch scheme and wrote a letter to a Japanese gaming magazine claiming to be an established publisher. The letter urged Japanese game makers to contact Brøderbund if they wanted to export



The Galactic Empire was Brøderbund first game series, and Doug Carlston first started work on this trilogy of strategy games when he was a lawyer

Brøderbund published Will Wright's first game Raid on Bungeling Bay, before he moved on and developed SimCity games to the American market.

Months later, Gary was settling down for a relaxing evening when he got a call from a man named Minoru Nakazawa. Mr. Nakazawa said he was from a trading company called Starcraft, and he had just landed in the Oregon airport – he had flown in all the way from Japan to meet with Brøderbund's executives.

"Me and my brother had a duplex and two computers; we weren't a real company at all, at that point," Gary says. "I was thinking, 'How am I going to impress this guy?' My brother and I had both gone to Harvard, but we weren't Harvard businessmen; we were Midwestern hippies. However, when Mr. Nakazawa arrived, he looked around the apartment and his eye landed on a copy of *Harvard Magazine*, and he said, 'Ah Harvard!' so for next three days we talked about world affairs, history, literature, and really anything other than computer games. At the end of three days, he said 'I didn't come here to give you the rights to our games. I'm actually on my way to L.A. for other business, but I've so enjoyed being with you that I'm going to give you the rights to our games.'"

Within a month of securing the contract with Nakazawa, the Carlstons sold $100,000 worth of software. It was enough to dig their company out of debt, and it gave them the capital to bring several other games to market. Some of those early hits included the side-scrolling shooter Choplifter, the maze-like platformer Lode Runner, and a precursor to Prince of Persia, called Karateka. Brøderbund was on the rise. In 1983, the company gained the rights to port the insanely popular Star Wars arcade game to PC platforms. And by the mid-'80s, Brøderbund had created a cultural phenomenon with the Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? series. [Read that story in our feature Worldwide Infamy, in issue 313.]

For the first decade, Brøderbund maintained an easygoing, family-like atmosphere as various developers wandered in and out of the office demoing their games and offering feedback on each other's work. Developers were constantly joking around with each other and testing each other's games on their breaks.

"[Carmen Sandiego co-creator] Gene Portwood used to draw all the time," designer Lauren Elliott recalls. "His sketches were brilliant, he could draw instantly. The Japanese used to come over and visit us, and Gene would draw Mickey Mouse in various compromising positions, and they just laughed and thought that was wonderful."

Around this time, Brøderbund became a breeding ground for hot young talent. Prince of Persia creator Jordan Mechner got his start working with Brøderbund. Douglas Smith broke into the industry through Brøderbund working on Lode Runner and eventually went on to work on beloved RPGs like Secret of Mana, Chrono Trigger, and Secret of Evermore. Then one day, a scruffy-haired young designer named Will Wright walked through Brøderbund's doors.

"Will wandered in, and they liked him, but they didn't know what to do with him, so they stuck him with me and Gene," Elliott says. "We spent the next several months working with him to get Raid on Bungeling Bay out the door. I admired Will, because he was unlike other programmers. You could tell he was always very interested in how a simulation could evolve on its own. And he was smart enough to start up his own company for SimCity."

Beginning Of The End

In 1993, Brøderbund had another massive hit on its hands with the adventure game Myst, which asked players to solve a series of mind-bending puzzles in a surreal world. A year later, Brøderbund bought the company Synapse Software and started selling electronic novels. A large portion of the company's revenue had always come from commercial products like Family Tree Maker, 3D Home Architect, and the desktop publishing package Print Shop. By the mid-'90s, Brøderbund was a publishing powerhouse. The company was profiled by magazines like *Fortune* and *Forbes*, and its stocks were valued at $2 billion.

"Before I left, we were talking about buying EA," Elliott says. "Then we were going to merge with EA, and then EA was going to buy us. Those talks deteriorated. I think that would've been an interesting combination of companies, but [EA founder Trip Hawkins] and Doug ended up not agreeing on how to work together."

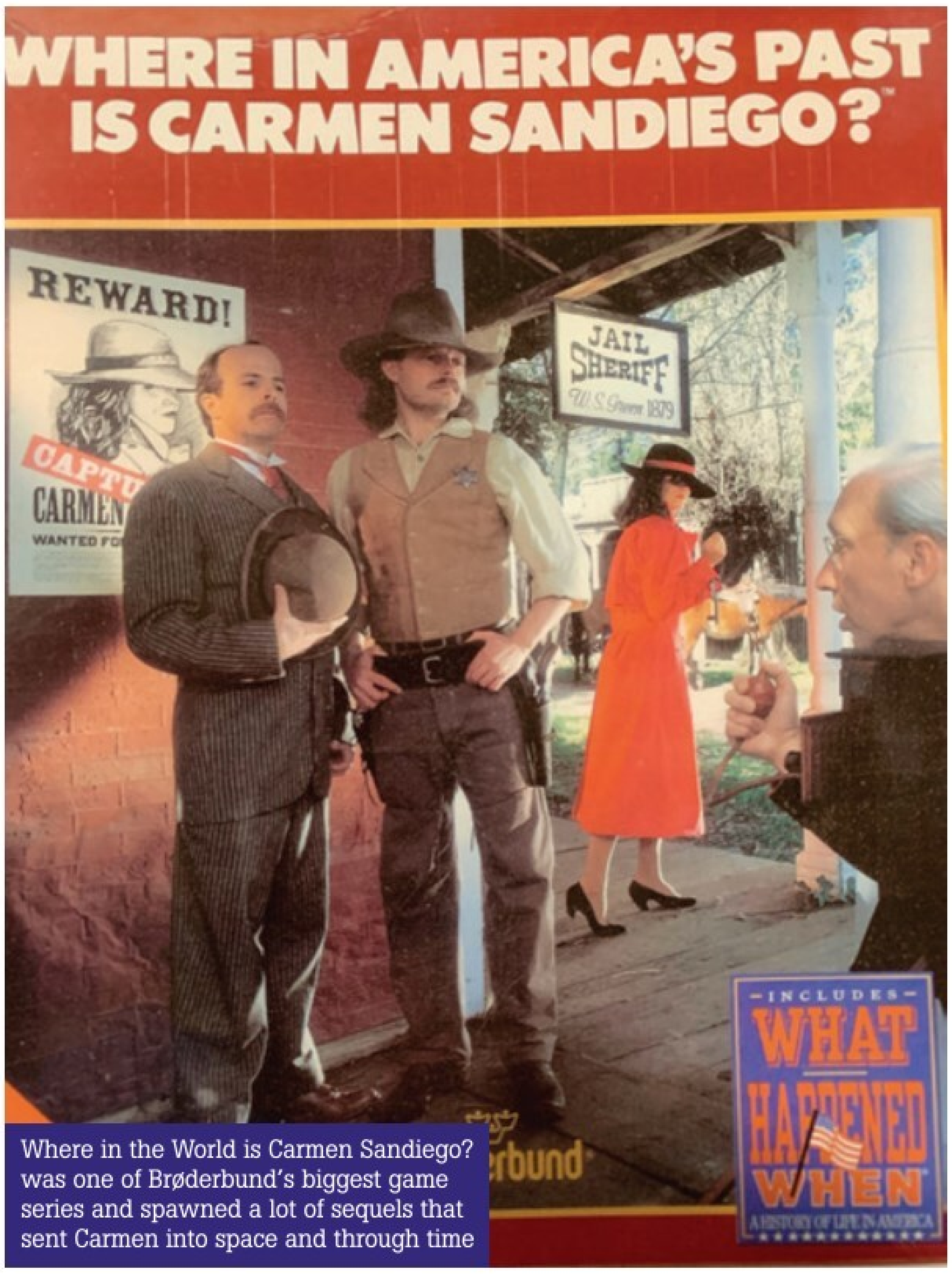
Brøderbund's success didn't last. The rise of online piracy in the late '90s hurt the retail software industry, which sent Brøderbund's stocks into a freefall. Then in 1998, The Learning Company purchased Brøderbund for $420 million, a relatively paltry sum considering the company's value just two years prior.

"It was a hostile takeover," Doug says. "They did an industry rollup, trying to buy up a bunch of companies and they raised billions of dollars on Wall Street to do it, but they were also trying to depress our stock prices. They told me they were changing the lock on my door the day they moved in. Then they flipped the company to Mattel a year later, and Mattel didn't know what to do with it, so Mattel sold it all for a dollar down the road. Nearly 2,000 people lost their jobs. That's American capitalism for you."

Brøderbund's best days were over.

Broderbund
The Leader in Desktop Publishing for Over 27 Years
the print shop
version 23
#1
Over 17 Million Sold
Desktop Publishing Software
150,000+ Premium Images
8,500+ Professionally Designed Templates
500+ Stylish Fonts
Happy Holidays

Brøderbund published more than games. One of its biggest successes was a desktop publishing package call Print Shop that let users make their own cards among other things


WHERE IN AMERICA'S PAST IS CARMEN SANDIEGO?
REWARD!
CAPTURE CARMEN
JAIL SHERIFF
INCLUDES WHAT HAPPENED WHEN
A HISTORY OF LIFE IN AMERICA

Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? was one of Brøderbund's biggest game series and spawned a lot of sequels that sent Carmen into space and through time

The company's products had brought smiles to gamers for years, but over the past few decades its holdings have been passed around so much that its name has lost all meaning. Carmen Sandiego is now published under The Learning Company label, for example. Meanwhile, some of Brøderbund's most popular commercial software was sold piecemeal to other companies; its home architecture software was bought by an AutoCAD company, while its Family Tree Software was rolled into Ancestry.com. Brøderbund ended with a whimper, and many of its best games have been largely forgotten. That is a tragedy, because Brøderbund's history is worth remembering. ◆

The Video Game Anagram Challenge

Strap on your thinking cap for another devilish test of your video game knowledge. This time around, you need to decipher some tricky anagrams to figure out the correct answer. Each entry below provides a clue to a popular video game or series, which can be discovered by rearranging the letters of the bolded words. Take a look at the example below, then get cracking!

*Example: Are you in the **MOOD** for fighting demons? Answer: Doom.*

by Jeff Marchiafava

1. A sinister corporation covers up **INVERTED LIES**.
2. **CRASSNESS ASIDE**, their methods for shaping history are quite effective.
3. Figuring out where to **REST IT** is the key to scoring big points.
4. Can the **STAFF NAIL ANY** flaws in the remake?
5. If you're ensnared in a mystery, you better tell this **PRO NO FALSE STORY**.
6. Industry **ELDERS THROW OUT** old franchise for a new sci-fi RPG.
7. Rough waters make the **SOFTIES HEAVE**.
8. **TORMENTERS HURL DOWN** attacks on diminutive pursuers.
9. Historic warfare in need of a **BELATED LIFT**.
10. Having a few teammates **EXPANDS GLEE** in large-scale competition.
11. The Mad Max **BRAND RESOLD**?
12. A grizzled soldier remembers what the **RAGE WAS FOR**.
13. Robots **CONTRIBUTE HOMEMADE** morality lessons.
14. Don't know where to roll next? **ASK LONELY BUMPER**.
15. Pro tip: Mute the **AFFLUENTLY ARMORED COWARD** who shoots you online. ◆

SCORING:

15 POINTS:	11 TO 14 POINTS:	7 TO 10 POINTS:	3 TO 6 POINTS:	0 TO 2 POINTS:
You are the Alan Turing of video game anagrams.	Scrabble champs ain't got nothing on you.	A little remedial gaming should get you up to speed.	Specializing in one genre will only get you so far.	Start sinking skill points into your Intelligence stat immediately!

Answers: 1. Resident Evil, 2. Assassin's Creed, 3. Tetris, 4. Final Fantasy, 5. Professor Layton, 6. The Outer Worlds, 7. Sea of Thieves, 8. Monster Hunter World, 9. Battlefield, 10. Apex Legends, 11. Borderlands, 12. Gears of War, 13. Detroit: Become Human, 14. Super Monkey Ball, 15. Call of Duty Modern Warfare

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

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Issue 317 • September 2019

www.gameinformer.com